

A Sermon on Turning from Death to Life

John 20:1-18

Life is stronger than death. But we cannot underestimate death. Death is more than simply our last breath. Death is the force that draws the life from us, that sucks us into nothingness. Death can draw us in such that, before we know it, we are bent over next to Mary Magdalene in John 20: 1-18, staring into an empty tomb.

Empty tombs come in many different forms. Not just talking about burial sites, talking about vacuous things, things that draw our attention and our energy in-only to waste our precious moments and life. I'm talking about drug and alcohol addictions as empty tombs. Young people, I appreciate social media, I'm talking about the seduction of cell phones and Facebook to draw us back in-just check a message- before we know it, hours have gone by, and we've missed spending time with loved ones in our own home. Older generation, I enjoy having some shows to watch, but I'm talking about the television news's capacity to suck us into panic or the TV to simply be vacuous, empty "background" noise. I'm talking about when someone says "The TV was on so long that I stopped watching it, it was watching me," such that precious moments of our lives are spent emptily. And I'm even talking about being fixated on "what happened in the past" where we get "tunnel vision" when all we seem to do is look backward or to worry about what could happen. That, too, can be staring at an empty tomb.

If I were still a Baptist and titled my sermons, I would title this sermon, "Turning from the Tomb".

On Friday night, a good number of us gathered here in the church, joining Jesus's family and followers at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene stood there at the cross, witnessing the trauma and tragedy of a crucifixion.

And here Mary Magdalene stands again this morning, in verse 11, weeping outside the tomb. Verse 10 tells us that the other disciples had returned to their homes. But not Mary. She is stuck standing in that spot, weeping.

Pause here to affirm that there is nothing wrong with grieving-that weeping over a loss is right and healthy. And we can grieve a loss for years, and it is perfectly OK.

But what none of us can afford to do is get paralyzed in one place. Heard the phrase, "If something's not growing, it's dead"? God made us to grow and we can definitely grow while we grieve but we cannot be static, we cannot get stuck standing at an empty tomb, because empty tombs are seductive. They can draw you and me in like looking over the edge of a cliff to calibrate a fall, and before you know it, we're singing with the Psalmist: "The cords of death entangled me. The grip of the grave took hold of me, I saw only distress and sorrow."

Life is so much more than lonely distress and sorrow. But when we are gripped by the grave, staring into empty tombs, we forget the vast richness of life. We can be gripped by the grave so long that while we believe we are trying to avoid death and suffering, what we really have been doing is focusing on death and suffering, training our eyes to see death and suffering, staring at the tomb, when life is patiently waiting for us, right behind our shoulder.

If rich, full, abundant life is waiting for us, right next to us, what will get us to turn around?

Look at the text: Mary is bent overlooking into the tomb, when suddenly, unexpected messengers appear; two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head, one at the feet. An unexpected message at an unexpected time can be just the encouragement we need to break our concentration on death and turn us toward life.

This past Good Friday was rough for me, y'all. Taxing to focus on crucifixion. My first Good Friday service here at St. Peter's, and I was so anxious about that and forming a sermon. And out of the blue, a friend called me, a messenger, who shared with me how God was active in his life over four decades of law practice and how Good Friday was important to him, and he wanted to share a blessing with me on Good Friday.

A messenger who broke my concentration long enough to turn me back to what is important, to turn me back to life. Sometimes, all we need is a messenger to ask the right question.

The angel says simply: “Woman, why are you weeping?” Sometimes the simplest questions evoke the fullest responses. Sometimes all we need is someone to ask us the simple question of why. Why?

The question breaks Mary’s concentration on the grave long enough that she looks over her shoulder and sees that there is a presence right next to her, who she cannot recognize. So logically, she assumes he is the gardener. Can I share something with you? That sometimes we have been staring at death so long that we cannot recognize life when it is standing right in front of us. Mary can’t recognize Jesus.

But then, watch what happens in verse 16. Jesus says, “Mary”, and she turns around. Before, she must have just looked over her shoulder, but upon hearing her name, she turns all the way around. As one of our friends from St. John’s said at a joint gathering last Wednesday, “There is nothing sweeter than having your own name on the lips of a loved one.” “Mary”.

Remember earlier in John’s Gospel Jesus says of himself, the Good Shepherd, “The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name.” O, how sweet to hear our names on the lips of Jesus.

When we hear from a messenger, we may turn and look over our shoulder. But when it becomes personal, when the Spirit of the Living Christ begins speaking directly to our hearts, directly into our lives, than and only then will we turn all the way around.

Andrew Terry is preaching to the St’ Peter’s congregation on Eater morning. But the Spirit of the Risen One is speaking directly to you -by name- and inviting you to turn around.

And once she turns around fully, it is evident in the text that Mary is so excited that she throws her arms around the risen Jesus, she takes a hold of him. And Jesus says, “Do not take hold of me, because I have not yet ascended to my father.” It seems strange at first. But the danger here, to us and to Mary, is to take hold of the new life offered to us in the same way that we used to have a grip on the grave.

To try to freeze the moment of her freedom in time. To try like Peter, on the mount of the Transfiguration, to build a permanent dwelling place on this spot of revelation. To stand and stare at life until life becomes as static as death.

Jesus says, No you can't stay here holding on to me, but Go! Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God". Mary couldn't stay put: She had to go.

The text says she went and announced, "I have encountered the Lord." She became the first witness to the resurrected Christ. It's time for you and me to be a witness. It's time to share with others the goodness of God, and go tell somebody about the new life you and I have been offered in Jesus Christ our Lord. For He has risen!! Alleluia!