

Easter
March 27, 2016
In the Garden

I would like to begin by doing things a little differently – [Hymn 314, vs 1]

This hymn we just sung was written in 1913 by Austin Miles and it is consistently one of the top five popular hymns, especially at funeral services. Because of its message of hope – which is the message we come to hear today. For this hymn and this first verse is through the eyes of Mary Magdalene. Mary was one of those handful of women who followed Jesus. One of those who met him earlier at a dark time in their life. For we met Mary in the Gospel when she was very sick and tormented – and Jesus touched her and healed her. And so, she became a follower – she was with Jesus when he arrived in Jerusalem to the shouts of hosanna – And she was in the crowd when they shouted for him to be crucified and along the route as Jesus struggled to carry his cross – and when the disciples had fled in fear – it was Mary and a few other women who watched Jesus suffer and die on the cross. And in that moment – this man who was the embodiment of love, grace, and forgiveness to her and some many others was hung on a cross like a criminal. And she was overwhelmed with grief.

For all her hopes and dreams died on that cross. And so Mary comes alone, while the dew is still fresh on that early Sunday morning. And as we sing about Mary, we know that Mary also represents us. She represents us as we go through, like her, those times when it seems like the world is a dark place. Because we too have known these days – days of grief and days of feeling lost when the darkness weighs on our souls. These are the days after the diagnosis of an illness; the day after a spouse walks out, leaving your life and heart in tatters, it is the day after the person you shared your life with has died. It is the day after you lose your job. It is the day

when the world seems so bleak that hope is seemingly nowhere to be found. It is the day we struggle with senseless terror attacks on innocents. It is the day when God seems absent. This is what is happening with Mary Magdalene as she comes alone to the garden that morning.

And then as she approaches the tomb, lost in grief – she is astonished find the stone has been rolled away. Her first thought wasn't of resurrection. People in the first century didn't come back from the dead any more than they do in our century – and so Mary was more likely irritated thinking - (What more could possibly happen?, first they kill him, now they desecrate his tomb?) Struggling to understand, we hear the desperation in Mary's voice when she says, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."

But then she hears a voice – [Sing Hymn 314, vs. 2]

He speaks and the sound of his voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing. Jesus says to her, "Woman why are you weeping?" But she is so swept away by grief, loss, and now irritation that she does not recognize who is standing next to her and comforting her in her grief. For the One who is the way, the truth and the life; who is the resurrection and the life; the Son of God who has entered the world so that world might be saved through him; the One who is the true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world; this Jesus has risen from the grave! And this changes everything.

For sorrow is transformed to joy and fear is transformed to courage and peace. The resurrection confirms the promises of hope that Jesus spoke to his disciples. Because the resurrection means that the worst things are never the last things. Resurrection means that death is never God's last word. Resurrection means that God can transform any situation, no matter

how dire. In this moment, at the sound so his voice – Mary realizes and we realize that light has pushed back the darkness, love conquered hate, hope has come from despair.

At the sound of his voice, we too realize that the cross was not the end – that the pain and suffering and loss and regret and anger and hurt – all that Jesus took and endured on that cross was transformed through the resurrection. It is like being caught up in storm on the waves of a great sea, lost and alone and then suddenly on the shore is a great and powerful light guiding the way, pointing to the safety of a harbor – this is what the cross does – as we get battered on the sea of life – we look up to see the cross as a beacon on the shoreline shining a light of joy onto the empty tomb – pointing us in the way we need to go – pointing us to the way to love and life – the way of grace and hope – the way to our salvation.

Because of the empty tomb – because of the resurrection – because of this story – this defining story of joy – our defining story - we hear Jesus’ voice and we know, like Mary, we are not alone and so we reorient our lives follow him – to come into the harbor of hope and know because Jesus spoke and still speaks – there is victory.

There is a story told of Desmond Tutu presiding during the darkest days of apartheid in South Africa. During one of his sermons the South African security police filed into the building with weapons, tape recorders, and cameras. Their mission was to intimidate Tutu so he would not speak boldly against the oppressive and violent apartheid government.

Bishop Tutu stared them down. And said to them, “You are powerful. Very powerful. But I serve a God who will not be mocked.” Then with a dazzling warm smile he said to them, “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to join the winning side.” Immediately the cowering congregation was transformed. They began to play music and they began to dance.

They played louder and louder and danced their way into the streets where even more security forces waited to intimidate them. The security forces ended up standing aside and letting the people dance. You see, Archbishop Tutu realized that victory was his because that tomb was empty – he was not alone – that community was not alone – their circumstances may not have changed but their perspective had. They were not powerless – they were an Easter people standing up and standing together letting their light of love, hope, and peace shine forth to make a difference against the hatred, violence, and injustice in our world.

You see, the resurrection changes how we face life. So, if we are struggling this morning with bad health or a relationship issues or with a loved one who is hurting – we will not leave here and our circumstance will change immediately and instantly – but the resurrection does change our perspective- and that change can make all the difference both in how we face life and how we face death.

I have been re-reading C.S Lewis the Chronicles of Narnia – these books that tell of these magical adventures of this group of kids – and the stories are an allegory – way of explaining Christianity and Jesus. And so in the last book in the last chapter we read how after seven books this group of kids is killed in a subway accident – and you think – “Boy this is depressing, I followed the adventures of these kids and then at the end they are killed off.” Except that isn’t the end. The very last paragraph reads -

“And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in

Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

This the hope of the resurrection. This is our ultimate victory proclaimed in that garden – that we are not abandoned in this world, no matter what we are going through or facing, and when we breathe our last we are only beginning chapter one of an even greater story. This is the hope of the resurrection that Paul proclaims as he writes – ‘Where O death is your sting, Where O death is your victory. For death has been swallowed up in victory’” But this joyous hope is not to remain with just us.

For on this day we are reminded once again, as Mary is reminded in the garden, that we are to be instruments of this hope. We have a mission – [Sing #314, vs 3]

But he bids me go, through the voice of woe his voice to me is calling. The first thing Jesus does at the empty tomb is to say to Mary – “Go and tell” and then later on he proclaims again – “Go and tell”. For we have a mission – Easter does not come around so we can get dressed up, color eggs, eat a brunch and go home and pack it all way until next year – We need to live Easter out each day as Easter people – as instruments of God’s hope.

And one of the ways I see this being lived out is found in our Gospel lesson. All the Gospels talk about the women, the disciples, the angels, the stone rolled away, but only John makes a point to say that the tomb was in a garden and that when Mary first saw Jesus, she thought he was a gardener. What an image this is. So, this might seem little strange to us, until we read the opening verses of John’s Gospel – “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the Word was God” These words, “In the beginning” appear only one other

place and that is in Genesis where another Garden is mentioned – the Garden of Eden – where through our actions, this garden was stained and ruined by our sins. So, how powerful that the resurrection is in a garden and Jesus is the gardener. For someone like me who grew up on my grandparents farm watching my grandfather take land that others said would never come back, never support crops – to watch him work to renew and restore and bring in a harvest, the image of a gardener is a powerful image. And the point is clear – what was broken is now being renewed – Jesus has come to set things right and fix the garden.

And as Jesus tells Mary to go and tell, so to do we have a role, we have a part to play in fixing and helping in the renewal of our part of garden and set things right where we are at. Once there was a church located near a park where prostitutes were often seen, drugs were sold, and gunshots were a more common sound than children laughing. The people were scared and felt like their home was gone. Many of them wanted to leave and move their church. They said this was no longer home for them anymore. So, they came together to pray and talk. And in their conversation one man stood up and said he had lived in this neighborhood his whole life and he wasn't willing to be pushed out but he urged everyone to push back with love. And so with some fresh paint, cleaning supplies, and a lot of faith they started to rehabilitate and renew the park into what they called Sacred Space. In time families began to come back and the sound of children was heard again. But the people of this church didn't stop there. Using the sacred space of the park, they began to reach out to the prostitutes, drug addicts, and homeless to offer them job training, recovery services, a hand up and another way out of their situation. They did not condemn but welcomed all to a place where healing and hope could transform hearts and lives.

For this is the work and mission of resurrection. Because it's the future that matters. It's hope that matters. It's faith that matters.

So, what part of the garden is in front of you that needs to be renewed? Who are the people God has put in your life to hear and see the Good News lived out by our faith? Where can we bring renewal? [Church – family promise – outreach projects – simple ways – drop off meal – write note – give phone call] Because even in a hard place and difficult place that we sometimes find ourselves in – our light shines the brightest – because of the hope of the resurrection.

Because this is our response to the resurrection? – To go and tell to and to proclaim hope. That God is always with us, even in the darkest moments of life. That we are to love God and love neighbor which means we demonstrate mercy and forgiveness and love our enemies. That in a divided and broken world, we are to be witnesses to something greater – a greater love, greater hope, greater peace that unites us.

And so I have had people from time to time say to me, “Do you really believe this stuff?” You're a smart guy. Do you really believe that Jesus rose from the dead?” And my response is: I not only believe it; I'm counting on it. I'm counting on the fact that that there is always hope. I'm counting on the fact that God walks with us through the most hurtful, painful times of life right through to other side. I'm counting on that fact that that the worst thing is never the last thing. That God forgives us and gives us the strength to forgive others. That we always have a second, third, fourth how ever many chance we need in life. I'm counting on it, because he lives. Because he lives our faith has power. Our lives are transformed and we have a part in a larger mission. Because he lives heaven and earth have touched and we are called to go forth to

being heaven unto the earth. For Jesus has walked in our footsteps, and he now calls us to walk in his.

The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty. Christ is risen today! I hope on this glorious Easter morning you will take this message with you and live it every day of your life, as Christ lives in you. The story is not finished because Jesus is still at work in the gardens of our world. And he is out ahead of us calling us to join him. So let us be filled with joy as we proclaim alleluia, alleluia, "He lives"

Amen.