

April 9, 2023
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

In Emptiness, Fullness

Easter morning begins in the dark. It begins with Mary Magdalene making her way to the tomb in the early morning. The streets are empty. The sky is empty. The garden she enters is empty. Mary herself is empty. She has lost all joy and all hope. She has lost Jesus. And her heart is empty because the tomb where they buried Jesus is full.

Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb, but she hasn't come to do anything. In John's gospel, she doesn't carry spices or ointments. She isn't coming to finish any unfinished business by making final preparations for burial. All of that has already been done. On Friday, the day of Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body. And Nicodemus the Pharisee, brought a hundred pounds of aloes and myrrh. And they wrapped his body with linen and the spices. They put him in a new tomb constructed for someone else. And it seems fitting. It is fitting that Jesus should be buried in a borrowed tomb. When he came into the world in a borrowed manger.

Mary Magdalene comes to this tomb early in the morning. She carries nothing at all. She has nothing to do. Her hands and her heart are empty. And just days ago they had been so full. When Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds had cheered and shouted: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!!” She knew along with everyone else that something was about to happen. That GOD was about to do something; and Jesus was going to bring it about. He would deliver them. From all the evil and darkness. He would deliver them from the Romans, from King Herod, from the corrupt religious leaders. Jesus would deliver God’s people and set them free.

It seemed fitting that it was the festival of the Passover. It seemed fitting that this very time, they were celebrating God’s deliverance of the people long ago. When God had made a way out of slavery in Egypt. God had made a way through the Red Sea. Out of no way, God made a way. Because God wants freedom and dignity. God wants hope and life for creation. Not tyranny, not oppression. How fitting it was that on this night, Jesus gathered with his disciples. And they ate and drank and

toasted the Passover. “Remember this night, Jesus said, Remember this meal. Remember me. Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me. You are part of me. And I am part of you. We are in this together to the very end.”

Jesus knew what was about to happen. He knew how this would end and he went out to pray. To beg God to spare them all; to spare HIM from what was about to happen. But not my will, but yours be done, O God. Even as he prayed, the soldiers arrived. And he was arrested. And the disciples fled. Then Jesus was passed around to the religious leaders and the governor Pilate and to King Herod. All so they can find a good reason to declare him guilty and condemn him. He is mocked and ridiculed by the powers the be. “What kind of a Messiah are you? What kind of a King are you? Not much of one at all.” Let’s make an example of him so others won’t get any ideas. Crucify him. Crucify him!”

They take all that Jesus has. They take his garments. They take his dignity. They take his humanity. They take him out of town like garbage and nail him to a cross. So everyone can see him and cringe at the sight. Jesus, himself does not hold anything back. He gives away whatever he

has left. He gives his mother to the disciple he loves. He gives his all forgiveness to the thieves and murderers around him. And finally, he gives his last breath, his spirit, back to God. It is finished and he is completely spent. All that remains of him goes into the grave.

After the day of the Sabbath, on the third day, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. She has nothing to do, nothing to offer except her grief.

Sometimes, that's all we have when it comes to death. All we have is our witness to love. And this is Mary's witness. The grave is her last connection to Jesus. This is all she has now.

But when she arrives at the tomb, she sees that the stone has been moved from the doorway. The tomb is open and it is now empty and unoccupied. In panic, Mary Magdalene runs to find Peter and another disciple. Then all of them run back to the tomb together. Gasping, breathless, terrified. They find nothing in the tomb. It is empty except for the linens that wrapped up his body. But Jesus is gone. Even his body they have taken away.

Peter and the other disciple go home, feeling even more empty and heartbroken than before. Evidently, there is no end to what they can lose.

To what others in power can rob them of. Mary Magdalene is still there and once again she looks into the emptiness of the tomb. This time, there are strangers there. “Woman why are you weeping?”, they ask. She replies: “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where he is.” Her Lord, her master, her friend. Her Jesus; whose body should be in that grave.

What should be full is empty. What should contain death, has no death inside. This should be the end, but it’s not. The heartache and grief of it all are strung along farther and farther. And we wonder, how could it get any worse? We might wonder that ourselves today. With the carelessness and hate all around us in the world. They way people who should know better, don’t seem to know any better. How the kingdom they proclaim does not resemble the kingdom of God at all. It does not bless the poor, the merciful or the peacemakers. It does not make the last, first or the least, the greatest. It does not teach us to love our enemies or even our neighbors. Instead it sacrifices those who stand in the way of stability. It sacrifices children for the love of guns. It sacrifices LGBTQ youth for social sensibilities. It sacrifices the unloved, the sick, the foreign, the

criminal and say that's the cost of doing business. Someone has to pay for our freedoms, they say. So sorry it has to be you.

Jesus knew that living that kind of life was like death. It was lifeless and spiritless. And it would catch up with them. They would have to surrender to God like everyone else. So Jesus shows them. He shows them how to lay down their life, so that they can find a new one. A better one. One free from slavery and oppression. Free from fear and shame. Just surrender. Die to yourself. Die to what must end. And God will raise you up.

But it is hard to let go. It is hard to give up all we know when we can't imagine something new. We can't imagine being raised up. And we can't believe that kind of thing could be true in this world. We are stuck, like Mary Magdalene, in that moment where we expect Jesus to still be in the grave. We expect there's nothing God can do. We expect that love is dead and gone. Not alive and free out in the world.

Mary cannot see it. She can't imagine it. The grave should not be empty. It should have Jesus in it. She turns around and there is another stranger. Perhaps a gardener. He asks: "Woman, why are you weeping? For

whom are you looking?” Mary replies: “If you have taken the body just tell me. Just give it to me and I will take it away.” She can’t imagine resurrection. She has nothing left to give her hope and faith. But then Jesus speaks to her. He calls her by name: Mary.

She knows that voice. She knows that it is Jesus. It’s him. Standing there; speaking to her. He is not dead. He is alive. His love, God’s love, is so strong that not even death can stop it. Not even the curse of hell or the condemnation of the world could stand in his way. He is free of it all. Free from suffering. Free from the worst things his enemies could dish out. Free to make us free. Free to give us a way where there is no way. Mary reaches out to Jesus. She reaches out to touch him. She will hold him and never let him go. She will never let them take him away again. “Mary, do not hold on to me,” Jesus says. “You can’t hold on to me.”

Like Mary, we want to hold on to him. We want to hold Jesus. We want to keep him. Protect him. Possess him. We don’t want him to leave us again. We don’t want him going off where we can’t find him. Then we will be lost. We want to keep him, control him, keep him locked away in

our churches, our theology, our certainties about what God does and does not do.

“But you mustn’t hold on to me.” We can’t keep Jesus where we want him. Because even death could not keep him. The grave could not hold him. He is going out into the world ahead of us. And that is where we will find him. “I must go to my Father and your father; to my God and your God.” And you must let me go. So that where I am, you may be also. I have made a way for you. Through death to life again. Let me be free so that you can be free. Let me be alive, so that you can be alive.

The tomb is empty. And Jesus has gone forth. And we have a message to give to others: Jesus is risen. He is alive. What we thought was the end, isn’t the end. So what else might that be true of? Who else might that be true of? What way is God making, right now, where there is no way? On Easter, the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. A path has been made through the waters of the Red Sea. We are delivered from captivity to freedom. Each of us. All of us. We have the freedom to hope. The freedom to love. The freedom to believe that God looks at us and sees

something beautiful. Something worth saving; someone worth redeeming. A creation worth making new again.

In the emptiness of the grave is the fullness of God. It is God's final word and that final word is life. Death is no more. It cannot hold us, as it could not hold Jesus. As he is alive again and set free, so are we. As he has new life, so do we. As we go out from here, may we go out believing in resurrection. And ready to see our risen Lord.