

Easter morning

John 20:1-18

April 12, 2020

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Brothers and sisters, grace and peace are yours in the name of our risen Lord.

I have a question:

When did you realize that the world was going to be turned upside down?

This is the question I imagine we will all be asking, a few months or years from now, when the final impact of coronavirus is better understood and we can begin to tell it as a story in the past.

When did you realize that the world was going to be turned upside down? When March Madness was canceled, when the students were sent home, when your business had to close its doors, when you realized the only human face you'd seen all day was on a screen; When you forgot to put on pants for your first work meeting?

One friend said she knew we were in a new world when she came into the den to find her sports fanatic husband watching the Hallmark Channel.

It is shocking to think about the changes we have seen in just a month, and even more shocking to contemplate what might yet still come to pass.

Already people are beginning to imagine the history that will be written, the generational impact this crisis will have.

We don't know what "after" looks like yet, but we know Before is never coming back.

When did you really know the world was turning upside down – that this was for real?

For me, it was the day our colleague and friend Craig Breimhorst was taken to the ICU. All the shut-downs, the empty pews, all the changes to at-home work and remote meetings, all of that seemed strange but not forever, hard but not devastating. And then I realized that I might never see Craig again. The turning point was a human life, or rather, a human death. This is the Easter after.

I do recognize though, for some of you that moment came at some other time this year, maybe long before we knew the word coronavirus, when your husband or sister or spouse died and you realized that this Easter would be the Easter After.

Death always creates before and afters. Death always interrupts. It's just that this year it has done so for all of us, all at once.

Whatever “back to normal” looks like, we can be certain it will not be the normal of before. If for no other reason than that before coronavirus tens of thousands of souls were with us that no longer are.

This before and after story is one we are used to hearing.

After all, our entire Western history used to be referred to as B. C. And A.D. “before Christ,” and “year of our Lord.”

There's everything before Jesus came into the world, and a world forever changed after.

Only this year we might well wonder – does Easter really change anything all that much? Does the fact that it is now the first Sunday after the full moon after the spring equinox make one bit of difference, when all our lives are upended by a microbe? It hasn't released us all from our homes, or our uncertainty.

The witness of the New Testament is clear – Easter does change everything. But the strange thing is we who live on this side of history don't really know what before resurrection looked like.

The entire New Testament, all of what we know about Jesus, was written after the resurrection. All of it, from the story about Jesus' birth to his miracles to his parables to his death – all of it is told to us in the light of Easter morning. Every story the apostles told about Jesus was written down after he was raised from the dead.

If Jesus had not been raised, there would have been no story to tell.

But it is remarkable that the surprise of Easter is still tangible in all the accounts. One teacher I know says you can sum up the New Testament in one phrase --- (huff, huff, huff) Christ is risen!

We can still hear the surprise and the grief and confusion of that Easter morning even though the authors had had some time to catch their breath. John was probably written forty, fifty, maybe even 60 years after Jesus' lifetime, but we can still feel the trauma the disciples felt after Good Friday.

You can hear the heaviness in the early morning visit while it is still dark; the shock when they find the tomb empty; the confusion as people run about; the weird details remembered about who got their first and what exactly they saw as they peered in; and then there's Mary, standing still, traumatized, still half blinded by her own tears, when there appears a man who sounds like her teacher but can't possibly really be her teacher, or can he?

She supposes he is the gardener, and all she can do is ask this stranger – **do you know where my Lord is? Please tell me.**

We know this half-blinded bewilderment; we are in the midst of it now.

Psychologists have been busy reminding us that the exhaustion and fuzzy headedness we have all been experiencing – that’s grief.

That seesaw between trying to get things done and then staring off into space – that’s grief.

The sense that time has stopped and we don’t know what day it is— that’s grief.

The fact that planning for the future feels impossible. That’s trauma and grief.

Have they taken away my Lord? When we are grieving the old certain things we thought we could see and believe feel unfamiliar.

But although grief may change everything about our vision, it doesn’t change **who** is present with us this Easter morning. The Jesus after the resurrection is actually the same one as before:

Sometimes people tell the story of the cross as if Jesus somehow changed God’s mind – as if an angry God was just itching to get back at us, and only Jesus’ humble obedience made him back off from destroying us all. People who tell this story as a before and after story seem to believe that a loving God could somehow knowingly create children who He would later want to punish.

But that is not the story John tells. In the biblical story there is only one story, only one God

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light

of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

This is the same God as before:

A God who made the world and called it good

A God who made us in his image and breathed his own life into us.

A God whose Word Jesus was there at the foundation of the world.

A God who has loved us with an everlasting love.

John writes: Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

When it comes to God's before and after – they are the same. You were made in love. Jesus came to reveal that love; and nothing, not even death, can change that love God has for you and for the whole creation.

Finally Easter morning isn't about before and after, about God's mind being changed but our finally seeing what God intended all along.

God sent the son into the world not to judge the world, but to save it

Because a God who is good must bring about good when God is done creating. God who is loving must bring us all to a loving end. God who had the power to make something out of nothingness will not let the creation die in nothingness either. Nothing will be wasted; no one will be lost; the Word who was at the beginning will be there at the end as well, meeting us and leading the way back to our loving beginning in the mind of God.

Some people have suggested that maybe we should just postpone Easter, because it feels weird to proclaim the resurrection in empty rooms and it would be wrong to say that everything is just fine. No one who looks at the numbers can say that we will escape this year without shedding tears – not just tears for our first-world disappointments but for human lives. But Easter is not about optimism. No one who takes the cross of Jesus Christ seriously can say that suffering can be taken lightly.

Easter is not about optimism. It is about hope. But our faith is all about what happens when we face the grave – when we stand at the cross and go to the tomb – and then we find that even in the valley of the shadow of death, we are not alone. Jesus has been there before and he meets us there, in the after, the after we can see now and all the ever afters we have yet to experience.

This is where we live -- after the resurrection.

We stand with Mary in the garden, and we can turn toward the tomb where there is nothing but death, or we can turn to the gardener. Jesus doesn't just look like the gardener. He is the gardener. He was there in the before when God bent down to the earth and formed us and breathed into us the breath of life. He is the one who is still creating and making all things new. He is the one who Jeremiah promises will bring back the scattered people with rejoicing, and they shall be like a well-watered garden.

He is the one who will be standing there when the grave is ours. But we don't need to wait until that moment after to be with him now.

He calls us by name, and we see that we are part of the new creation now. Today is the day of resurrection, today is the day after the world is turned upside down, and nothing will ever be the same again because

This is most certainly true:

Christ is risen.

How do you start your day?

A colleague of mine said that the most helpful retreat he ever went to focused on that question. In fact, it focused on the first 15 minutes of each day. How do you begin? How does one day, each day, start for you physically, mentally, with your relationships?

It's an interesting question because we know that it might be different for each of us:

For some it always begins in the presence of your youngest child, with their cry from the crib or their crawling into bed next to you. For some it begins with a text to an adult child, checking in to say, yes, here I am. Good morning.

For many of us that start is no longer necessarily with thoughts of what we will wear or what the traffic is going to be.

And often, for many of us now, it starts with the news – on TV or radio or phone or getting the newspaper – finding out what the latest is.

Rolf Jacobson says that this Easter we all have something with the women as she goes to the tomb on Easter morning, because we find ourselves checking in every day on the work of death.

What's the latest infection count. What's the latest death toll. How close to my own doorstep did this virus come today?

In a sense we always do this, even not in a pandemic, as we read the headlines and think about what we need to do each day – we don't call it looking at a death count but we all do it, as we keep track of the passing of time and the changes in the economy and troubles of the world. The

work of death is always around us and it shapes our days; this year we are simply that much more aware of it.

Mary went to the tomb, ready to complete the last duty of love for her friend. (327)