

“While it was Still Dark . . .” (John 20:1-18)

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Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

These are the words that Jesus speaks in John 19 just before life leaves his body. Jesus declares, “It is finished.” Witnesses to his crucifixion would fully agree. Jesus is dead. It is FINAL. It is OVER. It is DONE. Jesus experiences death, the most final thing that we know.

After Jesus dies, his body is taken off the cross and he is buried. Here is what John 19 says about the burial of Jesus:

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

When it comes to the Easter story, we focus a lot on Jesus’ death on the cross. We focus even more on the resurrection. Sometimes we as Christians are so excited about the resurrection we like to quickly move past the crucifixion and onto the resurrection. But the Bible tells us Jesus was buried. Between his death and resurrection there is space in the middle that is his burial. A time when everything, as far as everyone knows, is final and things will continue no more. Jesus is dead. Jesus is gone. And with his death lies the hopes, dreams and life that people experienced in him.

It's in knowing this final reality of Jesus’ death that Mary Magdalene comes to Jesus’ tomb on the Sunday morning. Here’s what we read in chapter 20.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went

straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

When Mary comes to the tomb, she comes knowing things are final. She witnessed Jesus die. She heard him cry out "It is finished". She is coming to the tomb at a time when dreams and future plans are over. She has lost the leader she has committed her life to.

Jesus being buried in the tomb was final. Now with the tomb being empty and the body missing, things are uncertain. Things are menacingly uncertain.

There are many situations in our lives where we face very difficult final things. The death of a loved one. The end of a dream. A loss of purpose. A complete and unalterable change of plans.

There are maybe even more times in our lives when things are uncertain – menacingly uncertain. Situations that make us question the presence or purposes of God. Situations that don't seem to have any clear resolution.

We relate to Mary's experience, both in the finality of things and the uncertainty of things. But in both of those situations, Mary approaches the tomb. Mary goes to the place of pain and faces it.

The disciples did not do this. The disciples were about avoidance. Jesus is arrested, and they all scatter. Jesus is crucified – only the disciple John is at the cross. The disciples do not go to the tomb until Mary tells them that the tomb is empty. The disciples avoid the finality of Jesus' death. But Mary sees that same finality. She recognizes it. And even though she believes Jesus to be dead, she goes to the tomb where Jesus is buried. Looking for something. Anything, even if it's just a felt connection to her Lord.

It's in facing final things and uncertain things that she fully encounters Jesus. John 20 continues:

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

It's in facing these hard things that Mary slowly begins to realize that Jesus is with her. She doesn't recognize him with her at first. Even when she doesn't fully realize it is Jesus with her, Jesus is with her. Jesus is present with her in the final things and in the uncertain things. He is fully Emmanuel – God with her.

We live our lives in between the crucifixion and the resurrection. When we follow Jesus, the Bible says we are crucified with him. We will one day be fully resurrected with him. In between we frequently encounter life with final and uncertain things. But in those final things and uncertain things the resurrected Christ is with us.

This morning I invite you to bring your loss and grief to God and to acknowledge those things that you are longing to be set right. Bringing these things to God does not mean we "get over" them or that they will stop being difficult. Many places in Scripture have writings of lament, where the authors honestly share their grief with God. Only by being authentic about our *grief* can we come to a place of authentically having *hope*.

So this morning in your pews there are pieces of paper and pens. While our worship team plays, take a moment to consider what those losses are for you, the things you are longing for God to heal and redeem. After you've written them down, the ushers will pass the offering plates to collect these papers, and they will bring the plates to the front and place them by this display of the tombstone.

Jesus promised his disciples before he died that in three days he would rise again, but those three days were difficult and confusing and hard to wait through and understand. In the same way, Jesus has promised that he is going to redeem our losses. We don't know what that will look like for us one day, but for today, we honestly give those things to him and trust him and his compassion and understanding as we wait in this in-between.

[after things are taken to the tomb] Jesus, we acknowledge you with us today. We bring to you those things that we carry with us, that haunt us, that bother us. We carry to you those who have died and leave a significant hole in our lives. We ask for your comfort. We ask for your guidance. We ask for your hope. Your real, genuine, reality-embracing hope. Lead us into the joy that passes all understanding. Empower and equip us with your grace every moment of every day. Amen.