**April 9th, 2023 Service**

**Scripture:**

John 20:1-18

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

3At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. 5Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. 7The wrapping that had been on his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself. 8The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed. 9For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

11But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. 12She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus’s body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“Because they’ve taken away my Lord,” she told them, “and I don’t know where they’ve put him.”

14Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. 15“Woman,” Jesus said to her, “why are you crying? Who is it that you’re seeking?”

Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, tell me where you’ve put him, and I will take him away.”

16Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, *“Rabboni!”*—which means “Teacher.”

17“Don’t cling to me,” Jesus told her, “since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them what he had said to her.

**Meditating on the Scriptures**

**Message:** “While it was still dark”

Darkness is all around. Dew still clings to the cold ground, wetting Mary’s feet as she slowly makes her way to the tomb. The darkness around her is not only from the lack of sun so early in the morning, but a feeling of hopelessness. A feeling of loss. When Jesus had found Mary, she was filled with seven demons. Here was a woman with many trials and troubles: no doubt, many had said she was too far gone for anyone to help her. But not Jesus. Jesus had healed her completely and given her a life she had never imagined was possible. The joy she felt in those initial moments of freedom had only grown as she spent time with Jesus and his other followers. This, finally, was a man she could believe in. And so, she had given him not only her time, but also supported him with her money. She had given everything she had these last few years because she truly believed that he would be the one to set the world free.

She had experienced his love and power herself and believed him when he said he was going to set free many others and make the whole world right. But now, all of that seemed like a distant memory. Jesus was dead. All she had left was his body. Yet even now, she would give what little she had left to honour him in the best way that she knew how.

But just as everything seemed to be as hopeless as she could remember feeling for a long time, one more blow sent her to her knees. Why was the stone rolled? Where was his body? Where could it have been? Someone had stolen it. They must have. Wasn’t it enough to have tortured him? Wasn’t it enough to have murdered him? Couldn’t they have left his body and let those who loved him mourn him properly? The last dregs of hope were sucked out of her bones.

Not knowing what to do, Mary got up and began to run to the few people she had left. The disciples have been hiding out: they saw what happened to Jesus, and they aren’t looking to follow in his footsteps and share in his fate. But when Mary tells them that Jesus body is gone, they set off running. When they finally get there, he’s gone alright, but it doesn’t feel like the work of robbers. Why would robbers leave the linen cloths that had covered him and were the only thing of value, and why would they fold up the cloth that had been on his face?

It just didn’t make sense. They believed that he was gone, but they didn’t understand what had happened. They still didn’t understand everything that Jesus had told them. Even though he told them over and over what would happen, it was just too crazy to understand. And so, confused as they were, they went home.

But Mary, the one who stayed with Jesus at the cross, and the one who was the first person up in the morning to go visit his tomb, stays. She stands for a long time weeping outside of his tomb and bends down to look in one last time. And then, suddenly, angels are standing there, and they have the audacity to ask, “woman, why are you weeping?” “They have taken away my Lord,” she says, “and I don’t know where they’ve laid him.” She turns to look away and sees that there is a man standing behind her. Probably a gardener, she thinks. Maybe he knows where they took Jesus?

“Why are you weeping?” he asks, “who are you seeking?”

Mary is distraught. Over and over, she is asked these questions, and all she wants to do is crumble to the ground. All she had wanted was to do was mourn Jesus and get some closure but even this small comfort has been ripped away from her. “If you tell me where he is, I’ll go and get him.” She says. But then she hears the last thing she expects.

“Mary!” Jesus calls out to her.

“Teacher!” she cries back. And she runs and embraces him.

I have always loved that Jesus chose Mary as the first person to know that he is alive. Perhaps because he knew that she needed it the most. Or perhaps it is because she is the one who was there. The one who stayed by his side when the others did not. The one who went to his tomb while it was still dark. But Jesus also makes sure that Mary knows that he isn’t here to stay for long because he says, “don’t cling to me, I haven’t yet ascended to the father!” Jesus isn’t done surprising them yet.

When Mary sees Jesus, she doesn’t just see a friend who she loved, she sees her Lord and teacher. She sees the reason for her hope and for the world’s hope. If Jesus can be resurrected, then he can also do everything else that he promised. If he can be resurrected, then everything he said is true, and he didn’t die a meaningless death—his death means everything—and it doesn’t just give her hope, it gives *everyone* hope. When Jesus calls her name, she recognises him. And the same is true for us. No amount of pushing or trying to convince us will work until we listen and hear Jesus calling our names. Jesus calls *us.* He calls you and me, but we may not recognise him yet.

And what Jesus says next is continues to surprise us: “Go and tell the others.” Jesus could do it himself, but he is purposefully including Mary in this amazing news. Mary is his messenger. She is the one that he trusts to carry the good news to the others. Perhaps Jesus is also seeing how the disciples react. Will they believe Mary? Or will they just dismiss her as a hysterical woman seeing what she wanted to?

The fact that Jesus not only appears first to Mary is even more wonderful when we consider that the culture of that time had little respect for the testimony of women. Their eyewitness account didn’t hold any weight in law courts, so to have Mary as the one testifying that Jesus is alive is not the way anyone would have expected Jesus to work.

It is one of the many reasons we can be confident that what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us is true. Because anyone trying to make up a story in the 1st century would never have had the first witness be a woman: it wouldn’t have stood up in court. Anyone making up a story would have been smart enough to make up something that people would believe. But Jesus didn’t partner with the people others expected him to in his life, and he doesn’t in his resurrection either. Jesus has always been reaching out to the people that no one expects. The ones that no one thought was good enough. Because these are the people who realise that they need him.

We often miss out on truly grasping the meaning of something because we don’t really understand what’s happening. But other times, I think that we miss out because we have become so used to something that we become numb to its wonder. I think that we often miss out on how incredible Easter is because of both.

With most of the other things that we read in the New Testament and in Jesus’ life, we have some understanding. We may never have seen miracles where food was multiplied, but we can imagine what it would be like. We might never have seen a lame man walk, but we have seen people recover from injuries and can imagine how wonderful it would be to speed that process up. We can’t fully understand the weight of everything that happened during Jesus’ death on the cross, but we have experienced the death of those that we love. But resurrection? Someone dead for three days coming back to life? That’s something that none of us has experienced. We don’t have any idea or paradigm for what that would be like because it’s so unbelievable to us. Imagine for a moment that someone you love that has died was suddenly standing and talking to you: that’s what Mary experienced.

But we also miss how wonderfully immense Jesus’ death and resurrection are because we have heard it so many times. It can become almost meaningless through repetition. It’s not unlike our breath, or the beating of our hearts. So often, we don’t fully understand the miracle of the familiar because we take it for granted. It’s only when we fear that we might lose it that we begin to truly understand. It’s only when we catch a glimpse of what life would be without it that we begin to appreciate all that we have.

My hope this morning is that we can better understand and take a moment and not just *say* or *hear* the words, but truly accept them as our own. Jesus died and rose again, for you. Not for a nameless, faceless mass of people, but for you and me. Close your eyes for a moment and reflect. Ask God to help you to know, deep down, just how much he loves you. We may not understand all at once. It may not be with a flash of lightning, but God will help us to know him more deeply.

We read over and over that the disciples were confused, not understanding what was happening. But this is exactly how God works. If we fully understood and could make sense of the way God works, it probably wouldn’t be God’s doing. God works in the unexpected and the impossible to understand. He takes what was hopeless and gives hope. He takes those of us who were outsiders and makes us his dearest friends and children. He takes those who are sure they aren’t enough and calls them to partner with him so that more and more people would know his love.

Jesus could have done everything himself. He could have appeared on the clouds and with a loud voice boomed so that all could hear and told them exactly who he was, but he didn’t do that. Instead, he calls us to join and follow him. To go and show and tell others the love that he has shown us. To tell them that he can do the impossible, and that this gives us hope. Yes, God is in control, but he desires that we join in with him to understand his love more deeply.

I think that we all have times where we question, “But why would God choose to work that way? Aren’t we just people after all? Maybe God does this for some people, but you don’t know what I’ve done.” And it’s true. I don’t know what you’ve done. But God does. And he tells us that his love for us isn’t based on the things that we do for him: his love is based on who he is. *God* is steadfast in his love for us even when we aren’t. *God* loves us because he created us to be his children and he has always desired what was best for us. Over and over in the Old Testament we read about God’s *steadfast love that endures forever.* And that has not changed.

Sometimes we are afraid to follow Jesus because we’re worried where he will lead us. If following Jesus means going to the cross, then we aren’t sure we want to go there. We’ve heard that God is mainly out to make us rule followers who have as little fun as possible. We imagine heaven as a place up in the clouds where we sit and play harps. No wonder many have no interest in God or heaven.

But God’s plan for us is very different. He wants us to live full lives—lives that overflow with joy and love. His plan for us is that we would never truly die, but that we would live forever with him. And what does this look like? Well, it looks something like what we read in Isaiah 25, where God swallows up death forever and wipes away all of our tears. God is tender and compassionate. He *wants* to save us; we don’t have to twist his arm.

In fact, Jesus already has done it. Through his life, death, and resurrection, he wiped away the tears of those who mourned, healed those who were sick and hurting, and he died so that death could be defeated forever. Jesus “swallowed” death. It doesn’t have the same power that it used to. Our bodies may still die, but we don’t have to. When Jesus was raised to life again, he showed us that he has the power to beat death.

Like the disciples, we may not understand. We don’t have everything together. But God does. And when he calls our names and we see who he truly is, we will run and throw open our arms to embrace him. Why would we wait? Jesus’ invitation is open to us: right here, right now.

 Mary was looking for Jesus. She searched high and low and was up before the sun just to get a chance to see him. And I think this is why Jesus came to her first: she was looking for something. Mary knew that she needed him. She was looking for a body, but she found a living person. She was looking to mourn, but she found perfect joy. We may not know what we’re looking for, but Jesus calls out our names as well, and he does not call with anger, or disappointment, but with love. His arms are open to us. And he is calling to you, and to me by name- no matter how dark the world may seem. No matter how disappointed we have become. No matter how hopeless we have felt. Through it all, Jesus calls out to us. It may be through, or the words of a trustworthy friend, or a song, or the beauty of nature, and it will always agree with the scriptures- but God does speak to us. He loves us, and he has called us by name.

Let’s take a moment now to listen for his voice.