



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Easter Day April 9, 2023

Christ Church Cathedral, Festal Eucharist 10:30am

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.

I sat with those words for many of the days of this week. I thought about Mary setting out in the darkness to get to the place where the body of Jesus lay. I thought about the emotions she might have felt as she was trying to process the grief and despair and the feeling of her heart being torn apart as Jesus' body was placed in the cold tomb. I thought of her fumbling and fretting as she made her way in the darkness to the tomb, to a place where as far as she was concerned only more darkness was to be found. She was not going to the burial site of Jesus to bear witness to anything more than a place of death, a place of hopelessness, of endings and certainly not beginnings. I thought of Mary and tried to imagine all that she might be feeling as she made her way as the darkness still kept hold before the break of the day. I thought of her searching for a path; as what was obvious in the light seemed hidden in the dark, much like many aspects of our life including our spiritual yearnings. Mary Magdalene was searching and seeking for something that might show her the way. I thought about Mary and saw in her maybe something I see in myself, maybe you see it in yourself as well. She was seeking and searching for a clear sense of God's plan, of God's presence, of God's voice, of God being near, of God even being possible. Looking for that which would lift some of the pain and the grief and the emptiness and the aloneness and the darkness and help her to see in new ways. Maybe you know this feeling too. Maybe she was scared to trust in it fully but then again perhaps she wondered if God was more than what she could ever allow.

Mary Oliver wrote this poem entitled *The World I Live In*. And this poem might just speak to something of what was going through Mary's mind on a dark path headed to a cemetery. A path that you probably know as well.

Mary Oliver wrote:

*"I have refused to live locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in is wider than that.
And anyway, what's wrong with Maybe?
You wouldn't believe what once or twice I have seen.
I'll just tell you this: only if there are angels in your head will you ever, possibly, see one."*

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and noticed that the stone had been removed from its entrance. She ran to tell others what she had found. Peter and one other came and saw only linen wrappings there. And oddly, at least I think it is oddly, these two simply left the scene. Not waiting see if there was more to the story, they left Mary once again to her wondering and questioning. And it was only then, it seems, that as she looked once more, she saw two angels where once a body had been lain. Two angels, two messengers suggesting that there is more to life and even death than what meets the eye. Still searching for more, when a gardener asks why she is weeping, all she can think to say is, "Where have you put the body?"

Mary Magdalene is like us. She wanted to know about God and how God works in this world, in our lives, in our souls. She was looking for some sense of light within the heaviness of the darkness. That there is hope when none seemed easy to find. That holiness and possibility can be discovered even in the midst of tragedy and predictability. That God is near when often our eyes are not open to seeing the presence.

Mary Oliver also wrote a poem entitled ***Mysteries, Yes***.

*"Truly we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood.
How grass can be nourishing in the mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever in allegiance with gravity while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the scars of damage, to the comfort of a poem.
Let me keep my distance, always, from those who think they have the answers.
Let me keep company always with those who say, "Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads."*

For this is what Mary Magdalene discovered at that tomb. She discovered a connecting place between heaven and earth, she discovered a depth of forgiveness that revealed a grace of God that seemed to have no end, she discovered in the voice of that one she thought was the gardener, the voice of love beyond death, of salvation beyond certain limitations, of peace in her soul as she knew without doubt that God was with her always, completely, fully, eternally. For Jesus was alive and suddenly she knew the power of the

resurrection as it took over from the darkness... and maybe that is what we too are hoping to find this day as well.

“Do not hold onto me,” Jesus said. Do not try to define me in simple and simplistic terms. Do not limit me, do not dismiss me, do not diminish me, do not lose sight of what has taken place here. Death has been conquered, right relationship with God has been restored, the light of grace has overtaken the darkness. And that light is what we are now called to live into. A beautiful light that makes room for a breadth and height to God’s love that is so much more expansive than the limitations we place upon it, the limitations where we try to hold onto Christ instead of seeing the expansive gift that he offers. And that gift, that love urges us to live into it fully, to share it fully, to shower it upon others as it is showered upon us.

The Reverend Wil Gafney is an Episcopal priest but also a theologian and teacher. She writes: “The beauty of Easter is rooted in the ugliness of crucifixion, an entirely legal process that is also wholly immoral. It is still the case that what is legal is not necessarily, ethical, moral, or right. We are called to be on the side of the crucified, not the empire that crucifies. That is the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is also life and love. It is easy to find the broken places in our world and those that deal death. Where are the resurrection spaces? Where do we look to see that death does not, in fact, have the last word? And what is our work in bridging the gap between death and life?”¹

We are not called to keep searching and only staring into an empty tomb. We are called to be witnesses and to get on with living as people of the resurrection. To live as people who know new life. To live as people who are forgiven. To live as people who are called beloved. To live as people trusting that God brings new life to any and all situations, that darkness does not win out, that death does not have the last say, that there is hope that invites and calls us. And to live as if we believe this from our heart to our mind, from our head to our toes.

Do not hold onto me Jesus said to Mary. Do not see Easter as some artifact to be kept in some museum somewhere. Rather it is about life, the whole of life, a transforming of our lives. That our searching and seeking to know that God is near is found in our midst this morning. God is amongst us, Jesus is known to us, the Holy Spirit still moves through this place. Because Easter is about living into this hope as changed people. Changed by what Mary discovered on that first Easter Day and is still known to us here and now. The resurrected Jesus in our midst pushes back the darkness and transforms our lives to bring us a new vision of how we see ourselves and all others created in God’s image.

For Christ is Risen
Christ is Risen indeed. Alleluia

¹ From *The Shadows of Easter* by Wil Gafney April 15, 2018