

SERMON
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Hallelujah! (Easter Sunday)

April 1, 2018

John 20:1-18

Hallelujah, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, hallelujah!

That is our Easter refrain—full of joy and hope. But that sure wasn't the response of Jesus' disciples on that first Easter morning. The various gospel accounts show the disciples responding with fear, incomprehension, doubt, and terror.

When Mary Magdalene arrives at tomb in the early morning to find the stone rolled away – she is terrified that the body of Jesus is missing. She has come to the tomb carrying burial spices to anoint Jesus' body. As she is walking there, she is probably wondering how she move the stone from the tomb entrance – but when she gets there, she finds the stone already rolled away, and the tomb empty. She is horrified; her first response is to accuse someone of stealing Jesus' body. She runs back to Peter and John and says

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!” (John 20:2)

And as the two disciples check out her story, and then leave the tomb to go and tell the rest of the gang what has happened, Mary sits down and weeps. It's a natural response. You can just imagine her pain as she is so broken. She has already watched Jesus die on the cross, and lost him through death, and now she has lost him again. Frightened and bewildered, she stands crying. All her hopes and dreams are gone. Her world has been shattered. It's just too much for her – so she breaks down – and Mary wept.

How often have we been in Mary's situation? How often have we stood by the tomb of our hopes and dreams and wept?

If you asked the parents of the teenagers that were shot in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High school – they stood at the tomb of their hopes and dreams weeping.

If you ask anyone who has faced an illness with an uncertain prognosis – they have faced fears of the future.

Or perhaps you know someone who has lost a loved one, and is left feeling heartbroken and lonely, and like Mary, they are trying to figure out how to go on.

Or maybe it's a relationship that has changed, and all the dreams that you once had are suddenly gone, and you're left wondering how to move forward.

Even loosing the security of a job might make us face uncertainty for our future.

All of these. All of them are ways that we might have faced a tomb of our hopes and dreams – and like Mary, we might have felt that all is lost ... and like Mary, we might have wept.

But the good news is that we do not need to stay in that place. The story of the resurrection teaches us that Jesus can meet us in the middle of those dark and desperate times – **if** we are ready to experience Christ.

As Mary wept, she looked up and saw Jesus. But it's interesting that she didn't immediately recognise him. Now personally I find this strangely significant. I mean Mary had followed Jesus, and she knew him intimately, but we are told that she didn't recognise him! Was Jesus really looking so different? Was he dressed in grubby robes and dirt on his hands like a gardener? Or was it more that Mary just wasn't ready to let go of her loss? She wasn't ready to experience hope.

It was only when she allows herself to believe and experience the joy that Christ is alive, only then can Mary carry the message of hope to others saying,

"I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18)

I think this is significant, because I believe that the Spirit of Christ walks with each of us in our dark times, and even though we may be filled with fear, incomprehension, doubt and terror - God is just waiting for us to look up from our tombs; waiting for us to be ready to experience the comfort, and joy that comes when we are willing to experience the risen Christ. Have you looked up and experienced Christ in your life? Do you know that joy? If not, let me promise you that God is standing beside you, waiting for you to look up and experience the Spirit.

Mary's message to the disciples was one of joy and amazement.

The hallelujahs we announce at Easter are full of joy and amazement!

"Hallelujah!" is our affirmation, that despite whatever hopelessness threatens to overwhelm us, we trust in the power of God's love to bring about resurrection within our lives. We don't know how, we don't know what it will look like, and we will certainly be confused and confounded by it if it should happen. But today, our hallelujahs declare that we believe resurrection is possible. We believe that we can experience Christ in our lives. And so, we do not lose hope, no matter how hopeless a situation appears.

This Easter season, as we sing, shout, whisper, and proclaim "Hallelujah!" may it strengthen your faith in the power and possibility of new life for you, for our church, and for our world. May we truly be a resurrection people. Amen.

(this sermon includes excerpts from the United Church Moderator's Easter message, which can be found at: http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/transcript_moderator_easter_message_2018.pdf)