

Easter Witnesses

“Mary, the First Witness of Easter”

[John 20:11-18](#)

Whenever I come across today’s text, I can’t help but recall the first Easter Sunday service I had with the first church I served out of seminary. While preaching on the same text we heard this morning, I gave the worshippers a riddle to solve as part of an illustration for the scene of Mary trying to cling onto Jesus. Let me read it to you:

What is this? It increases bonding and strengthens relationships.

It increases empathy and understanding.

It relaxes the body, relieves pain, improves the health of the heart, and boosts your immune system.

It relieves depression, alleviates stress, and elevates your mood.

It improves self-esteem and increases happiness.

It reduces fear of mortality and helps you stay young.

What is this?

As you can tell, it is not a difficult riddle to solve. In fact, I had expected someone in the congregation to guess the answer about halfway down the list, so that I wouldn’t have to finish reading it. Did this happen? Of course, not! I was met with complete silence. No one said anything, but I saw a few smiling faces which assured me people had gotten it. So, I said loudly, “You guessed it. It’s a hu----g!” The whole congregation burst out into a big laughter, and I moved on with the rest of my sermon.

My senior colleagues in ministry had told me that many preachers in America would tell jokes on Easter as a way of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus with joyful laughter. And clearly, my riddle had done a good job of doing just that.

Well, I found out the next day the real reason for their laughter. I had said the answer was *a hog, rather than a hug*. I made this mistake because I had only been living in America for 4 years at the time and differentiating a long vowel from a short vowel was still quite a challenge. I probably should have caught on when I saw the youths giggling, saying to one another, “What, oink, oink?” But in my excitement of preaching to the big Easter crowd, I was oblivious to what I had done. What a humbling experience it was!

In the Gospel of John we have been reading together this Lenten season, the Easter story begins with Mary Magdalene. Briefly, let me go over what has happened leading up to this point on the first Easter, which is recorded in the first part of chapter 20. Early on the first day of the week after Jesus’ death on the cross and burial, Mary goes alone to the tomb of Jesus and discovers the stone has been rolled from the entrance. Immediately, she runs to share the news with Peter and another of Jesus’ disciples, bringing them back to the tomb with her. The disciples go inside the tomb and discover that the body of their Master is not there. Only the linens that covered his body and head remain. And then they return home. But, not Mary. She stays outside the tomb, weeping, distraught over what might have happened to Jesus.

Some of you might be wondering. ‘Who was Mary Magdalene?’ She is one of several women named “Mary” in the New Testament. From her name, we can assume that she was a single woman. In the first century, if a woman was married, she would be called Mary, the wife of so and so. If she had children, she would be called Mary, the mother of so and so. But, Mary was identified with her birth place, Magdala, which was a thriving, populous town on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee.

Some people think she might have been the woman who was caught in the act of adultery who was pardoned by Jesus earlier in the Gospel of John; however, there is no evidence supporting this. Others suggest that she might have been “the sinful woman” who kissed and anointed Jesus’ feet in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 7:36-50). But, there is no evidence for this, either. Yet, over the course of church history, Mary Magdalene has become a symbol for repentant sinners whose lives are converted, or turned around, through an encounter with Jesus Christ.

In fact, according to Mark and Luke, Mary Magdalene was once possessed by 7 demons. A demon in the first century could be anything from an unexplained physical illness to a psychiatric disorder or some kind of addiction. While we can’t be sure of what she suffered from, the number of demons she had reveals to us that her affliction was deep. After Jesus drove the demons out of her, Mary’s life completely changed. She became a faithful follower and friend of Jesus.

Mary joined several other women who traveled with Jesus and his disciples and funded his ministry through their own financial resources. She was there through thick and thin, better or worse. She was there during Jesus’ trial. With another Mary, the mother of Jesus, she was there as Jesus was dying on the cross. And though all of Jesus’ male disciples ran away, fearing for their own lives, Mary bravely accompanied his body to the grave. After keeping Sabbath, she was the first person to arrive at his tomb on Easter morning.

From her continuing presence in Jesus’ life and ministry, and her devotion unto him after his death, we can see just how much she loved him. Mary’s Song in Jesus Christ Superstar, “I don’t Know How to Love Him” perhaps captures the range of emotions Mary might have felt toward Jesus.

Regarding Mary’s visit to the tomb of Jesus on Easter, the Gospel of John says that Mary went there early in the morning, while it was still dark. While it can simply mean the darkness of the time of day, perhaps we can imagine it capturing the anguish and inner turmoil of Mary. Perhaps, John was describing both the physical darkness before the sunrise, and the emotional and spiritual darkness that Mary was experiencing on the inside.

Mary must have still been in shock when she went to visit the tomb. Her heart still broken. Everything had happened so quickly. It was just a few days ago that Jesus was having a holiday meal with his disciples. Then, suddenly, he was arrested and sentenced to death. And not just any sort of death, but the brutal death of crucifixion -- condemned to his fate by the same adoring crowd who just a week earlier had welcomed him into the holy city waving palms and singing Hosannas. And to add even more insult to injury, she has discovered that his body has gone missing.

Can you imagine the helplessness and hopelessness that overwhelmed Mary at that moment? Full of sorrow, she does the only thing she can do. She weeps. John mentions not once, but twice that Mary wept!

Those of us who have lost someone whom we have loved dearly understand Mary's sadness and sorrow, don't we? We know all about the sleepless nights of staying wide awake in loneliness and longing. We know all about the grief that crashes into us like unrelenting waves, our eyes unable to keep the tears at bay. So, we weep.

We weep for our family and friends. We weep for the world. We weep for the innocent victims in our world - victims of natural disasters, victims of accidents and diseases; victims of socio-economic injustice; victims of sexism, racism, and homophobia; victims of violence, terrorism, and war.

We weep for ourselves. We weep with regrets because we did not do what we could have done and should have done. We weep in helplessness because we do not know what we should do. And we weep in hopelessness because through it all, God seems to be ever so silent, ever so distant.

It is in the darkness, in the midst of sorrowful weeping, that Jesus, the risen Christ appears to Mary. Or, maybe, Jesus, the risen Christ was there all along, and Mary could not see him through her tears. Even when she saw him, she did not recognize him right away. John says, only when Jesus called her by name did Mary realize who it was standing before her. She recognized his loving voice, the One who had found her before in her great affliction.

And once again, everything in her life changed, this time, forever. The light of the risen Christ pierced through the darkness of Mary's soul, and her sorrow turned to joy. Her mourning turned into dancing as she raced along to tell the disciples of Jesus' resurrection. And so, Mary, the bravely weeping one, becomes the first messenger bearing the good news of Easter.

Is there a dark place in your life right now? Maybe it's anger or resentment? Or guilt or shame? Perhaps it is a broken relationship or a broken heart? Fear or anxiety? Or maybe it is your children who have gone astray or your parents whose health is failing? Is it a bad diagnosis or a difficult treatment? Or perhaps it is uncertainty at your job or another promising lead turned into a closed door?

No matter what darkness you are struggling with, I want you to know that you are not alone. Jesus Christ, who suffered, who bore the sins of the world by suffering the terrible, humiliating death on the cross yet rose from the dead, is with you. He knows you and calls you by name. As we sang earlier today, Jesus, the risen Christ lives and is in the world today. He walks with you, talks with you along life's narrow way.

No matter what kind of dark place you are in now, I want you to know that your struggle is not the end. For Easter brings to us all an eternal hope.

That's the story of Easter, the story of Mary Magdalene, who was the first to meet the risen Lord while she was weeping, whose life was once again forever changed by the unexpected encounter. And it is our story, too, as followers of Jesus Christ

Even when we are confronted by the reality of our mortality and death, we have Jesus' promise of eternal life. He assures us by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

Brothers and Sisters, calamity, sickness, evil, and even death will not have the final word on us! So, as the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonian church, while we grieve our losses, we do not mourn like people who do not have hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

While it was still dark, while his disciples and followers had locked themselves inside their homes in despair and fear, while Mary was weeping, stricken with sadness and sorrow, Jesus rose from the dead. Nothing could keep him in the grave. Death was defeated through the power of God's love. This is the message of Easter that we boldly proclaim.

So, friends, joined by all the saints in heaven and our fellow Christians around the globe, let us proclaim together once again this mystery of our faith: Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

Hallelujah! Amen!