

“Out of the Tomb”

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I wonder how many of you feel weary with the world right now. Weary with the uncertainty, the isolation, the strangeness of masks and grocery stores, the zoom calls, the lack of contact, the convergence of work and home and school into each day, the graphs predicting death counts. It's exhausting and mundane and terrifying all at once. And somehow, amidst this, it's also Easter - a moment in the Christian calendar of celebration and life, joy and resurrection. I'm not sure if the convergence of Covid and Easter is absurd or prophetic. I suspect it's both.

In the Gospel of Mark, one of the sacred books in Christian scripture, we find the story of Easter. A story that speaks of death foretold, of suffering, of cruel leaders, of those who mourn the dead, of the struggle to return to life after the tomb.

After the crucifixion, after Jesus died, his family and friends watching from a distance, Joseph asks to take Jesus's body down from the cross. He wraps the body in linen and lays it in a cave, rolling a stone over the opening to form a tomb. This is how good Friday ends. Those who love Jesus have lost him, they've watched him die, unable to ease his suffering or hold his hand.

The space between Good Friday and Easter is called Holy Saturday. It's the space between death and resurrection, for Jesus's followers were observant Jews, as was he. Saturday, the Sabbath, was the day of rest. This is why Joseph wanted to make sure Jesus's body was in a secure place, so it would be safe until Sunday, when they would anoint him for burial. Holy Saturday is the day of mourning in this story, the day of heaviness and exhaustion, when hope is gone and the future unknown.

It's a day when everything stops and there is no work or busyness to distract from the grief and the magnitude. Their whole world has changed, those who loved this man from Nazareth.

As the Sabbath ended, the sun rose, and two women: Mary Magdalene and Jesus's mother Mary, gather the burial spices needed to anoint his body and prepare him for the grave. They go unsure of how they'll complete this task knowing, as they do, that there's a stone covering the tomb. They meet the morning unsure of how life will go on after Jesus's death unsure, even, of how they'll tend to his body. But they go anyways. And when they come to the tomb, they find the stone has been rolled away. Sitting inside is a man in a white robe. This, of course, scares them. How could it not?

And the man sees their fear and says, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus who has been crucified and raised. He is not here. But if you go to Galilee you will find him. Go tell his disciples."

The two women go, carrying this news and their confusion, their terror and amazement. As the story goes, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene first - she is the first to rise to the call towards life after death. And Mary Magdalene goes to find the disciples to tell them this news. But they are lost in their mourning, weeping, and they don't believe her. They will, eventually, but not yet. For the resurrection of hope, the return to life, it takes time. In this story, it even takes Jesus chastising them for their stubbornness and refusal to believe Mary Magdalene, it takes him appearing to them himself commanding them to go out and proclaim the good news. And still, it is not until after the ascension, after Jesus is taken up into heaven, and the disciples are left in the wake - it is not until after this that they begin to find their way.

One of my mentors told me that funerals are for the living, not for the dead. For in the wake of grief, returning to life, learning how to live

again under the weight of mourning, that is a profound challenge. And yet somehow it happens. Somehow life continues, grief bound up as a silver cord in the tapestry of our lives.

Because death isn't something we get over, it isn't something that leaves us, it's something that becomes part of the very fabric of our living. It changes us, rattles us awake, we who are left returning to life. Maybe that's the miracle. The staggering impossibility that somehow life continues after death shatters everything we know.

There will be a time after this, after all this isolation and talk of sickness. As one of my friends Rev. Megan Lloyd-Joiner preached once, "the tomb is not the end of the story." There will be a time after the tomb. We don't know what we'll find then, what life will be like, or how we will be called onwards, but it will happen. Surely as the maple buds. Surely as the damp earth bursting life after the depth of winter, there will be a time after all this.

And it's okay if it's messy, if we resist meeting that day when it comes because we are still overcome with our mourning and weeping and disbelief that life is still possible after everything that has changed. It's okay, too, if you meet that day ready to begin again, having faced your demons as Mary Magdalene had, and you meet this new life as soon as it beckons you.

And most of all, it's okay if today you're still not sure, if the idea that there will be a time after feels impossible, scary, too daunting to believe. Because resurrection wouldn't be a miracle if it was easy. It isn't easy. It's hard to imagine - harder still to believe, to hold hope in the aching cavity of an exhausted heart. It takes more faith than we can sometimes muster, especially in the moments when we're not even sure how to face the graves that mark our grief. But the Easter story asks us to gather our

supplies and meet the dawn, to see that rising sun and believe that the tomb isn't the end of the story.

I'd like to end with an excerpt of a reading by David Blanchard called "Rising to Life."

"At Easter, I find plenty of cause to celebrate. Not the heroic in God, though. After all, how hard can it be for God to be a hero? But I do celebrate the heroic possibilities that I have witnessed in human souls, when through resurrections of our own fashioning, we rise.

Rise to hope.

Rise to love.

Rise to heal

Rise to forgive

Rise to courage

Rise to foolishness

Rise to wisdom

Rise, even to die.

But most essentially, to rise to life.

Not to die a hero, but to live as one.

May we rise to Life.

Amen.