**Waiting Up - John 20: 1-18**

*Rev. John Allen*

Early that morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. It was still dark.

There was something in her, something that perhaps we recognize, that just needed to be close to her loss. To somehow move to stand close beside her grief.

It’s the same impulse that has leads people to gather at makeshift memorials after tragedies. Just a pile of flowers on a street corner, or flag hoisted over rubble. When we suffer pain, and loss, something inside us needs to mark, and to be near it. To try to find someplace to let the enormity of our anguish rest.

And so it was with Mary. She went to the tomb. While it was still dark.

She went, expecting a heavy stone. She went, expecting to weep in the dewy garden, in the dimness of morning. To share a quiet moment, mourning the man who had changed her life.

But. The stone was rolled away. And suddenly the grief cut afresh. She ran, as fast as she could, to the other disciples to share what she, and each of them thought, was terribly bad news.

The tomb is opened. His body is gone. Somebody took him.

The resurrection that we proclaim today, is so far beyond what could ever be expected, that it didn’t even cross their grief-soaked minds. They saw the stone rolled back, and their only thought was that someone, someone, had come and taken him away.

Someone had raided the tomb. Perhaps, the authorities who had condemned him to an ugly death had also decided even to rob him of a decent burial.

And the grief stuck them again. And they ran to see if for themselves. Peter and another disciple, simply named “the one who Jesus loved.” Their confusion is clear, the beloved disciple runs ahead, but stops short at the entry to the tomb. Peter forges ahead, and goes in, to see the body gone, and the linen wraps left behind.

And, scripture says, they did not yet understand. And as quickly as they had arrived, they left, back to the place where they had been staying. Probably to talk it over, and figure out what to do next.

And as soon as the boys are gone.

Mary sits down, to do what she had come to do in the first place. She sits down. And weeps.

The other’s come and go. Searching for an explanation. Looking to figure out the answer. Trying to make a plan.

But Mary, who will be the first witness of the resurrection, waits. She stays put beside the empty tomb, to let her grief out, and to simply be, in the midst of the tragedy, trauma, and confusion.

She doesn't try to put her head down and keep going.

She doesn't head out looking for revenge or justice.

She doesn't try to keep her chin up and soldier on.

She stops. And weeps. And just in that moment, as she is bent low by her grief, she sees angels.

She sees angels, two of them, sitting where Jesus should have been. And they ask her an impossibly obvious question.

“Why are you weeping?”

“They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him.”

And then a voice over her shoulder asks her again, “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”

She thought he was the gardner. And she asks: “did you take him?” “Just tell me where he is”

And he says “Mary”

And she says “Teacher!”

And throws her arms around him.

By now the sun was rising, and her grief was melting away. Her heart was filling up with with joy that had, even moments before, seemed unbelievable. Impossible. Back just a few hours earlier, when the sky was still dark and she knew. They all knew. That he was dead and buried.

And those other disciples, the ones who came and left in a whirlwind, the ones who saw but didn't understand, the ones who ran this way and that, overcome with their grief, and their need to figure out what to do about it.

They will hear the greatest news in human history, second hand, from Mary, who allowed herself to be still in the midst of the pain, to wait and watch, and weep beside an empty grave in the faint morning light.

And Thank God she did.

Thank God Mary did not try to soothe her grief with easy answers.

Thank God she did not distract herself with some positive thinking.

Thank God she did not numb herself to her pain, or avoid it all together.

Thank God she went to the tomb, to sit with her heavy grief. Thank God she waited up, when the others ran ahead. Thank God she wept.

Because it was then, and only then, that she witnessed the resurrection.

What Mary did, is hard to do. Grief is profoundly uncomfortable. It is agonizing. It is volatile. It can feel embarrassing. No wonder most of us try to rush through it, with a brave face and some positive thinking.

And when faced with someone else who is grieving, we get uncomfortable too, and rush to fill the silence with desperate words of comfort.

Yet most of you know by now, that there are some pains in our lives that no amount of positive thinking can overcome. And if you don’t know that yet, I pray you never do, but I also know you probably will.

It is important to know that our Easter joy is not just some easy answer to our fear of death.

The resurrection is not a comforting platitude to an unpredictable world.

It is not a way of avoiding reality.

The Joy of the resurrection that we have received, passed down generation after generation, is the hard-won hope of people who had mustered the courage to honestly confront their own pain.

It is the hard-won hope, of people who have, in the midst of that pain, also mustered enough courage to look for God. Who have leaned on their community, and prayed even if they were not sure anyone was listening, and looked, and longed for God.

The Joy of the resurrection that we celebrate today is the hard-won hope of people who for thousands of years have stared death in the face again and again, and steeled with God’s presence and supported by a community’s love, without a word of denial, have mustered up just enough courage to say through their tears: “Where O Death, is your sting? Where O grave, your victory.”

They did not deny the pain of grief. We do not ignore pain of human life. We do not try to keep our chin up and soldier on. Or run off, in search of an easier answer.

We sit down. And weep. We wait in grief. We sit still in sorrow. And then, after a while, faith tells us, we will feel a familiar hand on our soldier, and we hear a familiar voice say our name.

God comes to us in the midst of all the hard parts of human life, and all the madness of the world, and all the ordinary disappointments and confusion of everyday life. In the midst of all that God comes to say, this is not all there is. There is more.

This grief, as heavy as it is, is not the end.

This sadness, as deep as it is, is not the end.

God comes to say, this death, hard as it is, is not the end.

God says “My love for you. That get’s the last word.”

Joy. That get’s the last word.

Life. That get’s the last word.

Last year, because of an how the School Vacation lined up, I spent all of Holy Week and Easter on the road, on a Mission Trip with the church’s youth group in Santa Fe.

On Easter morning, I was awoken early by a small group of our youth who were determined to see the sunrise. But not just from anywhere. They wanted to go to the top of a very steep hill that was right beside the bunkhouse where we were staying.

Now I was very tired, in part because of the normal wear and tear of leading a Youth Trip. But in part because we had all been up very late the night before, circled around one of our youth who revealed to us all that she was suffering from depression. And her story of pain had drawn out other stories, and soon the room was full of teenagers, whose normal armor had dropped and who were sharing with one another, openly about the hardest things in their lives, and comforting one another, praying for one another, supporting each other, everyday they knew how.

It was the kind of thing that was simply too beautiful to interrupt with a curfew. But the next morning, I was nearly out of energy.

So while a few of them ran to the top of the hill, I hiked a more modest pace with some others. It took about 20 minutes, but it was all uphill. And all steep.

My group, the stragglers, made it to the top just as the sun was about halfway over the horizon. The first thing I saw those kids, the runners, sitting in a row facing the rising desert sun.

“Happy Easter,” I said, sitting down next to them.

“Happy Easter.” They replied.

We enjoyed a few moments of reverent silence after that, admiring together God’s handiwork in the beautiful sky. But I couldn’t resist, I was their pastor after all. Finally I ruined the moment and asked. So what does Easter mean to you?

They were still silent. Then, without taking her eyes off the rising sun, the young woman whose brave vulnerability had kept us up all night said, quietly: “There’s always hope.”

This is the Good News that we proclaim each Easter. That God did what seemed impossible, and Christ rose from death. And that for us, this means that not even death is greater than the power of God’s love. Not even the grave can hold us away from our Creator.

The Good News is not that grief will never again be felt. Or pain will be no more. Or all suffering end.

The Good News is simply this. There is always hope. God is still here. Love, and life, and joy, somehow, someway, will get the last word.

Now our lives are full of things that make this seem impossible. That make it seem like such a love as God’s couldn’t possibly be true.

Our world is full of things that make us feel like hope is gone. That make us feel like death won.

Just remember, that Mary was sure too. She was sure that she was going to a tomb. She was sure that she would be weeping beside a body. When she got there, it was still dark. But the light was already growing brighter, and as she collapsed under her grief, and she allowed herself to sit still, and witness the enormity of her own pain.

And when she looked for God, and stayed open to the possibility of God’s presence in the midst of it all.

She became the first witness of the resurrection.

And thanks to her. We sing now, something that might still seem impossible. We proclaim news that seems too good to be true.

It is not an easy answer. It is a hard-won truth of our faith.

Hope which seemed buried, rushed back.

Love which seemed lost, poured out again.

Death which seemed victorious, is defeated.

Christ, who was dead, arose.

In other words: “There’s always hope.”