



The Reflection of Grace
John 20:1-18
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Again, good morning, and Happy Easter! We gather today to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord. We rejoice as we proclaim the good news, *Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!*

There are few days in the year that call for such pomp and circumstance. There are few days in which we dress up in, not just our Sunday best, but in our Easter best. There are few days in which you are given reason to wear your finest hats and fascinators (that's a real thing. Just google it.). It is a day that calls for finding the right pastel colors to compliment the hope and prayer that spring has finally arrived – even if it is still snowing throughout the northern states.

Easter is a celebration unlike any other. That's not to say there aren't other special days in the life of the church worth celebrating. Christmas, and the welcoming of the birth of Christ, is well worth the celebration. Pentecost, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, is well worth the celebration. All Saint's Day, in which we remember our beloved ones past, is well worth the celebration. There are other days that are worth the celebration of God's good work, but there's something about Easter that just lifts it above all other days.

I have good friend who was diagnosed with Leukemia in her 20s. She is just a year younger than me. We lived in the same neighborhood growing up – our homes backed up to each other. We attended the same church; we went on many retreats together; we sang in the same choirs and put on musicals together. I remember that, as one might expect, her fight against cancer wasn't always easy. But, for all the difficult days, there were good days amidst her treatment – there were days to celebrate. Like when the doctor said the treatments were working, and when the scans showed the cancer was lessening, and there was a celebration the first time she had been deemed cancer free. Only, shortly thereafter, the cancer did return.

But there is one day that stands out above the rest. For all the days in the journey that pointed toward hope for her, for all the days that offered joy amidst the concern, there was one day that stood out. On August 15, 2009, she underwent a bone marrow transplant, and since then, she has been cancer free.

That day is still celebrated each year in her life. This August will mark year 9 of her being cancer free. Family and friends, new and old, will take pictures holding up 9 fingers, and sharing them on Facebook and via text with words of joy and celebration on the day she calls her transplantiversary. It's like a new birthday for her – a second chance at life. Of all the days on which she had received good news in her life, that day stands out as worth the celebration more than any other.

That is what Easter is all about. For all the days that are worth the celebration, this day stands out because it is the day on which we proclaim the story of resurrection, of new life, and complete healing; it is the story of how death does not have the final say.

In recent weeks, we've looked at some of the pains and difficulties that life has to offer. We've considered the places where brokenness exists in our personal lives, in our communities and nation, and in the conflicts throughout the world. In each place of brokenness, whether it's relationships that are strained, or health problems that don't seem to go away, or policies that divide people from one another, or a nation that just can't seem to agree on the best path forward – there are times, glimpses, and momentary visions of healing to come. But even as we grab at moments of fleeting hope, we know the brokenness still exists. It seems we lack any certainty for true and complete healing as we wonder, where has the civility and love for one's neighbor gone? Is there any hope worth proclaiming that can heal the pain in full, that can bridge the divide, that can reconcile the most shattered of relationships?

Yes, there is such hope – and so we remember the good news of Easter as we hear the story once more proclaimed.

Mary Magdalene, the text tells us, went to the tomb before day break. It was still dark as she approached the tomb where Jesus had been laid. She did not even make it to the tomb, but could see through the dark the stone that had closed the tomb had been removed. Fearing the worst, that grave robbers had stolen his body, she turns around and runs back to find the disciples and says to them, "They have taken his body, and I do not know where they have laid him." She believed that someone outside the grave had moved the stone, and gone inside to take out Jesus' body.

Two of the disciples get up and start running to the grave: Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved, who is believed by most textual scholars to be John.

As they were running, John starts to take over and run faster than Peter. A seasoned runner can't help but wonder why Peter had not finished his long-distance training. If this were a marathon, he perhaps should have stopped at the half. I often wonder why Peter slowed up. Was he out of shape and running out of steam? Or, was he thinking again of the recent days' events, recalling how he had failed to speak up for Jesus just a few nights before, having rejected his association with Christ? Perhaps, as it was about daybreak, Peter could once more hear the rooster crowing, and the guilt of the memory slowed him down.

John reaches the tomb first and peers inside. He does not enter, but he can see the burial cloths lying on the floor. Peter finally catches up, and decides to go right into the tomb to have a look around. He too sees the burial cloths lying on the floor, but notices that Jesus' head covering is rolled up and set aside by itself.

I'm no grave robber, but I can't imagine that if I were stealing a body from a tomb, that I would take the time to remove the burial cloths. That would be like a pick-pocket taking out your

wallet, removing the cash, and putting your wallet back in your pocket or purse. That's just not the way thieves work. I don't speak from experience here, so if you're a veteran thief, you're welcome to correct me. But really, even if this were a very OCD grave robber who didn't want the burial cloths because of any stench or oils that might have soaked into them, I can't imagine someone stealing a body would take the time to fold or roll up the cloths before leaving with the body. Peter seems to have the same thought process, for he doesn't know what to make of the situation.

But John – now entering the tomb behind Peter, sees the cloths, and we're told that upon his seeing the room, he believed. "Apparently [for John] recognizing that robbers would not waste time removing the grave-clothes, [was enough evidence to conclude] that Jesus had risen from the dead."ⁱ The gospel writer feels it important to note that he believed, but did not as of yet understand the scripture – he didn't fully know what it meant that Jesus would rise from the dead. We can only assume he knew that Jesus had risen – that something more than a grave robbing had taken place. But it's also pretty clear he didn't know quite yet what this meant, for the two disciples leave with no excitement. There is no Easter jig taking place outside the tomb. They two do little more than return to their homes.

Perhaps passing her on their way out, Mary is now back outside the tomb weeping. Like a loved one who has gone missing, Mary is weeping for Jesus for she knows not where he has gone. She still believes his body had been taken.

She leans over to the tomb and peers in. Where John and Peter saw only the burial cloths, now Mary sees two angels, dressed in white, sitting where Jesus' body had been laid.

I understand that grief can have odd effects on people. No matter what anyone says, there is no best way to grieve and process loss. People who are overcome with such grave heartache often have trouble reconciling reality because they are overcome with anxiety or fear. And yet, I'm not sure I understand how it is Mary doesn't realize the two entities now sitting in the tomb are angels. *Why is she not freaked out by the fact that somehow, two individuals have *poof* appeared inside the tomb?* And they speak to her!

"Woman," they ask, "why are you weeping?" ... I didn't know angel-splaining was thing. One might want to call the PC police, because it looks like we're about to see a 1st Century woman be told how to grieve by the angels. "Why are you weeping?"

Mary, for however she has reconciled the fact that these two angels are sitting in the tomb, still hasn't figured out what's going on. She says to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him." The angels do not need to respond to her, for walking up behind her, Jesus has appeared. Only, she doesn't know it's Jesus. She thinks him to be the gardener. So again, still thinking Jesus to have been taken by a grave robber, she asks once more, "Sir, if *you* have taken him away tell me where you have laid him, that I might take him away."

In her mind, Mary can see nothing but a broken reality. She can't process the presence of the angels, and she can't process that it is the risen Lord before her. In her mind, there is but a shattered image of an empty tomb. In her tears, in her fear, in her uncertainty, she has given herself only one possible outcome, that someone has taken the body of Jesus, and that in such an act, all hope and love is lost.

Such a place of sorrow is not foreign for those of us who wrestle with a world that seems to be lost. Often on our knees weeping for the missing piece that offered the only glimpse of hope, we wonder, where is the reflection of grace in the mirror?

And the He speaks again. In the disappointment and shame, in the hurt and pain, the Lord, resurrected, risen from the dead, in the flesh standing before her, he speaks her name. "Mary!" he exclaims. "Mary!" he calls to her. "Mary!"

There is power in a name.

"In that moment, the empty tomb becomes more than the abstract truth of God's power over death. In that moment, the empty tomb becomes the concrete reality of the presence of her risen Lord."ⁱⁱ The Biblical promise says that as the shepherd calls them by name, the sheep will hear his voice, and they will know it is the Lord.

In relief and exasperation, Mary cries back, "Rabbouni," which means "teacher." In the unwritten narrative, as one would expect upon the realization of a loved one who has come back from a place unknown, like a spouse receiving home their deployed, or a parent offering welcome to their college student on spring break, Mary seems to have embraced Jesus. Yet, there is no time to hold on. Jesus says to her, "Do not hold on to me, but go to my brothers and say to them, the Lord is ascending to the Father, to my God and your God." And she went forth, proclaiming as Jesus has instructed, saying, "I have seen the Lord."

Easter is not just another day of worship for the church. It is not just another day of remembering God's love. Easter is something special – it is worth celebrating with great joy. For it is at Easter that we are reminded that like Mary, Christ is calling us each by name in the moments when we are hurting the most. Like those times in the E.R. waiting room when the doctor walks out shaking his head; in the funeral home when you catch the first glimpse of the open casket; and on the floor of the nursing home as old friends share in one last good-bye. In the call of our name by the Lord of salvation, we discover a hope, we grasp on to the joy, "so as to remind ourselves that death is not the end."ⁱⁱⁱ ... So we sing, 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'

This is no ordinary celebration. Easter is no common thing. "The resurrection is not resuscitation; it is not a return to things as they were before."^{iv} This is a promise, that as those who are named, claimed, and called by God, we need not fear the evil of death, for even death could not overcome the glory of the Lord.

And so, we see in these mirrors our prayers for God to know us, to call us, to strengthen us, and to claim us by name. We see in these mirrors that we are each like Mary, who have come and encountered the great love of God in the presence of the risen Christ, and we hear the voice of Christ as he calls to us, “Go forth, and proclaim the good news” for the grace of God is not an object to be known, but is a gift that is to be lived.

The resurrection is worth the celebration, because the reflections we once saw as broken in shattered mirrors, are now made whole in the reflection of grace. Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe. Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that is greater than all our sin.

So let us proclaim and rejoice, for the voice of death, the call of destruction, the invitation to exclusion, the pain of separation, the rejection of justice, and the persistence of evil do not win, for even the grave could not contain the love of God. The reflection we see is a gift of grace, that is offered into our lives by God, that we may know the full love of the Lord. So as we see ourselves as God sees us in these mirrors today, as beloved children, for whom God overcame death that we might know true love, let us rejoice and proclaim, *Christ is Risen; Christ is risen indeed!*

ⁱ James E. Davison. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Gail R. O’Day. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved March 26, 2018.

^{iv} Beverly Roberts Gaventa. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.