

“In the Garden of the Empty Tomb”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill

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Texts: John 20:1-18

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,
Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw
that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple,
the one whom Jesus loved,
and said to them,

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,
and we do not know where they have laid him.”

³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

⁴ The two were running together,
but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

⁵ He bent down to look in and saw
the linen wrappings lying there,
but he did not go in.

⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw
the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head,
not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first,
also went in, and he saw
and believed;

⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw
two angels in white,

sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the
feet.

¹³ They said to her,

“Woman, why are you weeping?”

She said to them,

“They have taken away my Lord,
and I do not know where they have laid him.”

¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw
Jesus standing there,
but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her,

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him,

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her,

“Mary!”

She turned and said to him in Hebrew,

“Rabbouni!”

(which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her,

“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my brothers and say to them,

‘I am ascending to my *Abba* and your *Abba*, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,

“I have seen the Lord”;

and she told them that he had said these things to her.

1

His name is not so familiar, but his words probably are. In the late nineteenth century, a young man trained at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and at the University of Pennsylvania, and began a career as a pharmacist. But at the age of 24 he abandoned that vocation and followed a different calling: dispensing gospel songs as a composer and writer and editor — at least 398 of them. He was Charles Austin Miles. We may not know his name, but most know at least a portion of a song he wrote 105 years ago:

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

“I come to the garden alone.” This is where so many of us begin. Like Mary Magdalene in the garden, well before sunrise: alone.

Alone when you have set off on your own, perhaps to find a great adventure or to escape a great trouble. Alone with the exhilaration of a deep discovery, or with the awful hurt of a crumbling relationship that has lost its promise. Alone in a country or a community where you are not welcomed, not wanted. Alone with a deep pain. Alone with a grief that can scarcely be

described. Alone with a diagnosis that has suddenly made life infinitely more precious and momentous because the end of it is near.

“I come to the garden alone.” Mary was the first one there in the garden, alone with her grief: the first to see the shocking emptiness of the tomb. Mary is the last one there, after she ran to fetch the other disciples. You notice how often it is true of the women in the Bible: pushed into second place, but arriving first and remaining after.

“I come to the garden alone”: it’s good to remember when you sing those words you are lifting the voice of Mary Magdalene from the day of resurrection into today. Mary Magdalene, known as the Apostle of the Apostles. Mary Magdalene, in each of the four gospels the first person to witness the evidence of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene, whom the Bible never described as a sinner of any kind, a strong woman whose reputation has been twisted unbiblically and unjustly.

Mary remains, alone with her pain and confusion at the loss of the Messiah she loved, and the empty gravesite that seems to deny her even the decency of grieving.

Mary remains, alone to meet with the strange beings inside the tomb — who tell her a story even stranger than angels appearing on earth.

But suddenly, Mary is no longer alone.

2

Mary meets Jesus in the garden, the one whom she knows and loves who now, she learns, is far more than the person she knew. He is Jesus of Nazareth: same voice, same touch, same piercing look. And more: he is the Christ, anointed by God to fulfill the promises of one who will lead the people in humility and love. And he is still more: he is the Christ of the Cosmos, the one in whom all things come into being, the one whose very self is a universal force of wholeness and harmony, justice and joy, containing all life that ever was and all life that will be!

Mary is no longer alone with her pain.

You might think that the Cosmic Christ, the one in whom all things come into being, would likely be remote, and probably too busy to return your phone call. But the risen savior is also entirely concerned with you. With each individual you listening now, with each individual you who is on the planet, with all of us together.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

Walks with *me*; talks with *me*. A joy *none other* has ever known. You do have to wonder whether this describes the Jesus who was so interested in a shared faith, a communal faith, and not so interested in personal piety. More on that in a moment.

3

For now, we remember that the resurrection story of today began before history, in the depths of mystery, when the Word of God called all things into life, and called them good.

The word took on flesh and drama, took on resistance and resilience, the word took on healing and humility in Jesus, born into poverty and grown to be among the wisest of all teachers.

The word took on pathos and pain, as the One in whom the disciples recognized hope was torn from them and murdered.

The story could have turned out differently, if the followers of Jesus responded purely out of grief and pain. We saw it in Peter, striking out with his sword. We know what that looks like in our own time, when woundedness or fear becomes an excuse for lashing out against someone who looks like a stranger. It is not pretty. It is not the Way of Jesus.

As a wise spiritual teacher says, “if we do not transform our pain, we will surely transmit it.”

The loveless powers of the world tried to kill love on a cross. As far as they knew, on Easter morning, they had succeeded. But in the story today we see through Mary’s eyes, an empty tomb. We see through the eyes of a fisherman and his friend, the belief in Jesus’ rising that is beyond any understanding of the mind. We see the Teacher himself — “Rabbouni, my teacher,” says Mary.

Wouldn’t you want to stay there? In the garden that has suddenly become not a place of grieving but a place of love and fulfillment, like the garden of Eden long ago?

I’d stay in the garden with Him,
Though the night around me be falling,
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

Jesus comes back from betrayal and denial, from torment and crucifixion. But not a Jesus we can hold onto. Not a Jesus that will fit neatly into the box of any religion. Our story gives us the mystery of life that rises out of death, the wonder of life that rises out of death, the power of life that conquers death once and for all. Those belong to all of God’s children.

Like Mary, we may meet him alone in the garden where we entombed our grief. And like Mary, Jesus sends us away to tell the story: that God’s mystery and wonder and power are undiminished by human failing. Life has burst the bonds of death.

Mary’s pain is transformed by the power of life that out-lasts death. Our pain is transformed so that we are now free to share not our grief but our wonder in the mystery and joy of God. Nothing to prove, here: just a story to tell, the story of life.

This story also tells us where we belong, now: alongside anyone in grief or pain, especially those who have been hurt and falsely accused and pushed to the margins by the

loveless powers of our world. We belong with women who are immorally and unjustly objectified, patronized, pushed aside, paid inequitably. We belong with veterans whose needs are effectively ignored after their service is no longer needed. We belong with refugees who are seeking someone like Jesus who will see their humanity and their need, instead of their citizenship status.

We belong at their side, in the garden of their distress, because we know that pain does give way to wonder, and loss can resolve into union, and grief will transform into joy. You and I have that story to tell, to someone who needs it.

This is what God does!: pain transformed into wonder; loss transformed into new union; grief transformed into joy!

Pain is temporary, and wonder is permanent.

Loss is a passing thing; union is everlasting.

Grief will come to an end, but joy will continue forever.

4

The song by Charles Austin Miles has a twist in it. The words seem to say one thing, but then a greater, brighter meaning rises out of them. Each time we sing the refrain we repeat:

And he tells me I am his own.
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

“I am his own.” “None other has ever known.” It’s a great joy, and can feel like the joy is ours, and ours alone. But this is one of the best-loved songs ever written. Which means that thousands on thousands have sung, “I am his own,” and “none other has ever known.” Which means that, in actuality, millions of people have known that joy! Not “none other,” but an uncountable multitude. Not only my *Abba* but your *Abba*; not only my God but your God.

It turns out that “none other” than I — actually includes you! There is no I, apart from you! Turn to your neighbor and say that: “There is no I, apart from you!”

There is no Christ, apart from you! Turn to your neighbor and say that: “There is no Christ, apart from you!”

Now we see, in the light of resurrection, that in the risen Christ of the Cosmos all separation is erased: I am because you are!

If you are hungry, I am hungry; if you are hurting, I am hurting; if you are rejected, I am rejected — and if you are raised to renewed life by love, then so am I!

If I am to have fullness of life, it will be because you also have fullness of life — and if need be I will pray and prod and petition and protest and pour myself out in order for you to have fullness of life.

The rising of the Christ, the One who contains the Cosmos — turns out to be a rising for for everybody. Not just professed followers of Jesus. He is life and breath itself. The world is made new, in the image of love! Christ is risen!

And just in case this is the first sermon you have ever heard and just in case this is the last sermon you will ever hear let me say it clear: God's love will take your loss, your grief, your loneliness, and give you the gift of life that will not be conquered. Love that will last forever. Because Christ is risen!

5

No pain: new life!

No payments: new life!

No punishment: new life!

No posturing: new life!

No pandering: new life!

No pontificating: new life!

No prescriptions: new life!

No placebos: new life!

No pie in the sky: new life!

No more preaching: new life!

Christ is risen! Amen!