

Church on the Mall  
April 5, 2015  
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill  
Psalm 96:1-13  
John 20:1-18

“Courage to Stay”

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! This is the day that the Lord has made. Friday was the day that the world made. Friday was the day marked by suffering and sin, marked by hopelessness and pain. But today is the day that the Lord has made – marked by resurrection hope and new life. Today is God’s day to proclaim love and mercy, to shine the light of Christ once again into the world’s darkness, to bring the hope of redemption into the world’s violence and despair. This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Today we gather on the first day of the week to witness what Mary and the disciples first witnessed almost 2,000 years ago – that our Savior, Jesus Christ is not bound by death and not defined by the sins of the world, but is defined by God’s love and gives us our identity as children of a God who does not allow suffering and death to be the end for us. By raising Jesus from the dead, the hope of eternal life has been realized; the fear of death has been conquered; the kingdom of God has been revealed, and it is a kingdom where God’s glory is shown. The world no longer waits in darkness for redemption; today our world has been redeemed by a love that transcends even the worst hardship and despair.

We join Mary Magdalene as she heads to Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week. We join her devastated – her Savior, the one who healed her, her friend, her hope for the world has just died, and grief is settling in. She comes to the tomb in the dark, alone, and she brings nothing with her. No ointment or spices to tend to the body, no friends to share in the grief and be with her in her anguish. She comes to the tomb alone and she brings nothing with her.

Her reaction makes sense – the stone has been rolled away: not only has her friend and Savior died, but now, as if things could get any worse, now someone has stolen his body. Even in death things get worse. The first part of our story is commotion. There's lots of running; panic, fear, uncertainty. Her moment of solitude and grief is upset by this discovery of the tomb being tampered with. She races back to tell the others what she believes to be true: They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him. Immediately, Peter and another disciples head off towards the tomb; not even running together but racing each other to get there. Peter is outrun, but ends up going inside the tomb first. They see the linen wrappings but no body, confirming Mary's discovery, then head back. Why did they leave? Were they going to tell the others, going to devise a plan to figure out where his body was, going away just to forget about it all? They've had enough of this nightmare, perhaps? There is confusion, a lot of activity, back and forth, uncertainty. Peter and the other leave.

But Mary stays. She doesn't go back with Peter and the other disciple, but she stays right there, by the tomb. Even though her anguish and heartache is too much, she bears it anyway and stays there, by the tomb. Our second scene is much different than the first. If the opening scene is emergency and reactive, this second scene is the exhale after a crisis. Everything is much slower in this second scene. Mary stays by the tomb and weeps. She has the courage to stay – in the midst of grief and suffering, she stays and bears the pain. In the midst of her darkness, two angels ask her, why are you weeping? In the midst of her darkness, the Risen Jesus appears to her, comes to her and asks her – why are you weeping?

The world's suffering and darkness is too much to bear. She is in a moment of deep despair. A grieving woman, coming to be at the graveside of her dead friend. She is bearing the brunt of a harsh world whose power was made known on Friday. But this is the day that the Lord has made; this is God's day. Compelled by her tears, or compelled by his compassion and love for her, the Risen Jesus comes to Mary and transforms her life, turns her mourning into a joyous celebration of new life. The Risen Jesus comes and calls her by name, and she becomes the first to proclaim that she has seen the Risen Lord. This is the day that the Lord has made!

The world makes its claim on us and we are challenged with suffering and grief. There are pains that lie in each one of our hearts; there is grief that stings with sadness and despair; there is abuse that marks our bodies and our souls with someone else's violence; there is shame and guilt from our own poor choices; there is the bite of anxiety

and depression that eats away at our own self-worth. The world makes its claim on us with hardship and despair. We can take our place beside Mary and that grave, wondering what next? What else? It's too much. Too much pain in our own lives, too much pain in the world, too much violence, too much death, too many demons seducing us. We can take our place beside Mary and that grave; we can empathize with her sadness, her discouragement, her grief.

Heartbroken and overwhelmed, the Risen Jesus comes to her, perhaps, because she had the courage to stay. She had the courage to stay by the emptiness and with the uncertainty and loss; she had the courage to stay and the Risen Jesus appeared to her and called her by name. While the day the world made – that Friday with the public shaming, the humiliating crucifixion up high on that cross for all the city to see – here, on this day, the Lord's day, this day that the Lord made – the Risen Jesus comes to Mary while she is alone. He personally comes to her and calls her by name and she recognizes him. The world's way is violent, public, chaotic, lonely and death-filled. The way of the Risen Lord is personal, intimate, transformational, and life-giving.

There is no open reversal of Friday's arrest; there is no public outcry for a retrial; there is no going back to protest to the chief priests and scribes. Because this is the day that the Lord has made; on his terms, in his way; God chooses to raise Jesus in the privacy of a tomb, in the darkness of night, without pomp and circumstance, without public witness. God chooses to come to Mary as the Risen Jesus, one on one, with the intimacy of calling her by name so she will recognize him.

I know why the others left; I know why Peter and the other disciple went back home. It's too much. The headlines in the newspapers about Christians dying in the Middle East, the violence in Kenya – it's awful. The stories we hear of children being abused at the hands of their relatives, the horrible impact of drugs ruining families and bringing violence right out into the streets here in Philadelphia. Facing our own demons of poor decisions and lack of ambition or loneliness or health issues or grief: the suffering of this world is too much, it's awful. I know why those two left that tomb. It's too hard to stay.

But Mary stays anyway. She has the courage to stay anyway. The hardship and heartache of the world and of our lives is too hard to bear. But she stays anyway; she bears it anyway. In a sure sign of courage, fortitude, and perseverance, she stays. Even when it's too much and she can't stay, she stays. And because she has the courage to stay, the Risen Jesus comes to her and transforms her with the precious, sacred gift of new life. The Risen Jesus comes and transforms the world's suffering with God's redemption, showing that death and darkness do not have power over God's love and forgiveness. The Risen Jesus claims Mary as his own, not a victim of the world's sin, but a blessed child of God who is claimed by this resurrection hope. And she would've missed it if she went back with the others.

Friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to stay. Somehow, we, too, have to find the courage, fortitude, and perseverance to stay at that graveside. With all the Good Friday moments of this world – when hope dies, when suffering is too much and

we can't take it anymore, when grief is unbearable – we have to stay. It's the only way we will hear the Risen Jesus call us by name. If we leave, we will miss him. The promise of this blessed Easter morning is that the Risen Jesus will come to us with transformative new life when we are in the dark, deep pit of hopelessness and pain. The promise of this blessed Easter morning is that when we are willing to face our demons, sit with our despair and wrestle with whatever it is that gets at the pit of our souls, God will come to us and be with us and transform us with new life and mercy and love and blessing. God doesn't leave us in the pit; he doesn't abandon us in death, but he shows up, to claim us and give us new life, second chances, new beginnings, forgiveness.

It's unbearable to stay in that place of deep darkness, of ugly death, of deep hopelessness – but this is what is asked of us on this day; this is our faith story. The promise revealed to us on this glorious day of resurrection is that God comes to us in the middle of our hardships and heartbreaks. Just as Jesus endured the horror of the cross, just as Mary endured the wretchedness of the tomb in the dark, alone, before knowing he had risen, we too need to have the courage to stay with our pain. There is no new life without death first. There is no light without darkness first. But when we have the courage to go to the cross with Jesus; when we have the courage to stand by the darkness of the tomb with Mary; we, too, are promised the new life that is not defined by the ills of the world but is defined by the love and mercy of our God who is always faithful to us.

We are really good at avoiding crosses and tombs. We're so good at it we don't even know how good we are at it. We drink; maybe not a lot, you know, just enough to take the edge off. We dive head-first into work and become super busy being responsible and productive and highly efficient. We create enough drama and chaos that our lives are always just getting through the superficial – up here, on this level, so we don't have to face the demons down here. We get really bogged down with the benign and meaningless – tracking down the right colored brushed nickel face plates for our remodeling project. We find all sorts of ways to escape. We find all sorts of ways to leave that graveside with Peter and the other disciple. We binge watch television for hours on end (since when did binging become a good thing?). I once had an acquaintance who was a surgeon; really busy all the time, always busy. He once confessed – the thought of going for a walk alone on the beach terrified him. He was wrestling with some serious demons and they were too painful to bear. Busyness was escapism; it was his way of abandoning that grave just like Peter and the other disciple.

We find all sorts of ways to escape and our society is structured to help us do that. So this takes an intentional act of faith on our part – to stay with Mary by the darkness of the grave; to stay with our pain that is unbearable, to face our inner guilt and shame that we are so good at ignoring and covering up, to be alone with our loneliness and grief and loss. This courage to stay is an act of faith; it puts our trust in the promise that God will show up during our darkest hour and heal our deepest wounds. The courage to stay is an act of faith because if God doesn't show up, it is too much. Staying is the

only way to experience the true glory and the true beauty of this blessed day of resurrection.

The great truth of the resurrection is that Jesus Christ has conquered the grave. We no longer fear death because the way to eternal salvation has been opened to us this day and we know with confidence that we will reside with our Savior after our time on this earth is done. On that first Easter morning, this truth of eternal life was opened for Mary, but she didn't have to wait until her earthly death to experience the presence and transformation of the Risen Christ. New life came to her in a way that transformed her mourning into joy and her weeping into delight while she was still alive. For us, too, friends, we give thanks and praise to God for conquering the grave for us, that we will spend eternity with our Risen Lord. We also give thanks and praise to God for granting us new life and hope and transformation even here on earth, when we have the courage to stay by the darkness of death and the suffering of the world. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Alleluia! Amen!