

Psalm 133  
John 20:1-18

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## HOPE AS RESURRECTION

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. *John 20:10-14*

With the possible exception of the Edwardian Era leading into the First World War, I doubt there has ever been a time like today when humankind was so confident of its ability to solve massive technical and scientific problems, while being so terrified by moral, military, and ecological crises. We tremble to get the lid back on the box.

The Greeks explained the entrance of heartache and evil into the world through the myth of what we call Pandora's Box (actually it was a jar). All evils—everything was understood to have its opposite—had been safely kept by the gods in the jar. But Pandora, the first mortal woman, seized with an eager curiosity to know what the jar contained, one day slipped off the cover and looked in. Immediately a multitude of plagues, ailments and deadly pestilences, envy, spite, revenge and all their hideous companions leapt out and scattered themselves far and wide. Pandora tried in vain to replace the lid, but the whole contents of the jar had escaped. Everything, that is, except one somnolent trait which lay serenely on the bottom of the jar. Its name was *hope*. And as long as we have hope, no amount of other ills can leave us completely wretched.

Hope is the mainspring of the spiritual drive. It is the God-whisper, especially in hard times. It's the cupped hand leaning into the ear, whispering, "There is more; this is not all there is!" Even death cannot kill hope. That's why hope is the message of Easter, the shout of the resurrection. This is not fancy or contrivance, some cotton candy to sweeten life's bitter pill. Hope is kept alive by experience. Hope brings its own reward. It is the God-stirred resurrection stories of faith from officers and members who over and over again have said, on the day of installation, and in our wonderfully rich fireside chats of late, and in recounted mission trip experiences, that when self gave way to another's need—when each took hold of that slender thing called hope, something beautiful happened. Hope's promise of "something more" transformed them, revealing the undiscovered. It changed them. Taking hold of this slender thread of hope, something beautiful happens, something transforming changes us

Early on Sunday morning, John tells us, "while it was still dark," Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. Why, one wonders? He was dead. Everyone knew he was dead. It could not be with the expectation of seeing him, for as John tells us a few verses later, his followers didn't yet grasp what Jesus had said about his rising again. So what was it? Very simply, hope was at work in her. Whether in a desire simply to be close to him, or to pray outside the death-cold tomb, or to weep, to let her love for him seep privately into the night; whatever it was, she came aching with lamentation and loss.

Hope is what keeps bereavement smoldering: snuggling a loved one's clothes for the lingering life smell of them in their abandoned closet. A cuddled photograph in its frame.

Speaking her name out loud in an empty house. Little conversations into the pillow and the hurtful silence. A hand feathering across the vacant side of the bed. The way he would stack his shoes vertically in the closet, to save space, and how it irritated you, and now you weep at the smallness of it. The things left unsaid, unresolved. The prodigal use of time. You want your loved one back, even for a little while. Of all the guests, welcome and unwelcome that cluster around bereavement, hope is always the last to leave. And so she came to the tomb, and stayed when the men had left.

Nothing is innocent in John, not a word, a phrase, or an image. In the stillness of dayspring, before the sun has been delivered, she looks for the first time into the half-lit tomb, and a sequence of images builds out of despair: the discarded burial cloths lying in a heap like soiled laundry, and some steps away . . . (huh!)—the head cloth neatly rolled up, as though by . . . whom? Then two angels. They ask why she weeps (they must have been males!)

“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where . . .” Then turning as if with incomprehension and wonder, she sees someone backlit from the gathering light, a figure in silhouette. Of course! The gardener, “He would know!” So she asks him, delivering the question back into the emptiness of a tomb that begs so much explanation.

Then a voice from behind her. “Mary.” Just that. And in a flash she understands.

“Teacher!” she cries, lunging to embrace him. But he raises a hand.

The thing about hope is that when everything else has been stripped away, when religion is stripped of its accouterments, traditions, dogma, rituals and certainties, the soul, like Mary’s, still cries out to be personally known and valued. Tell me there’s a purpose, it says. Tell me I can get through this. Tell me this is not all there is. I promise you, says Easter’s resurrection story—your sorrow, your pain, suffering, rejection, loss, the state of the world—this is *not* all there is. There is more, infinitely more.

The worst thing we can do is to assume there isn’t anything else, when God has promised that there *is* so much more. Or to assume that we’ve arrived when we think we have answered life’s big questions, and don’t need God. Rejection and cynicism are so much easier than faith. Don’t you just hate it when someone dismisses out of hand what you hold sacred, really important, whether religion or otherwise. Some give up on the search because they mistake religion for its founder, as though they were the same thing. They confuse institutional religion with all its frailties and excesses, with Jesus; or militant Islam with Muhammad; or militant Jewish fundamentalism in Israel—that would remove or annihilate from the land every semblance of the Palestinians—with God. Jesus is no more the same as the church than we are pure and innocent as when we were born. Yet everything of Jesus is offered here to help keep us on track, to reclaim, as it were, the infant’s purity that’s gotten overgrown with adult sophistication within. That’s what we are about when we accept God’s “assurance of pardon” in our worship. When the hope that is in you asks and receives it, we are brought back to our “made in the image of God” again. Now that’s resurrection! “But I don’t feel resurrected just by your saying the words of assurance,” you might say. I understand. That’s because self-love, like love of neighbor and love of God, is a journey—maybe the longest journey of all. But God still forgives when we ask, no matter how we feel. Isn’t that resurrection?

When we go it on our own, just when we think we have it all figured out and nailed down, something very humbling often happens. You lose your job and the career track you were so wedded to implodes. Or war breaks out. Or a meteorite hits your new home as you’re walking to the mailbox with the first check for the home insurance. Or your spouse, or a child, or your fiancé dies. Everything we claim to be certain of turns out to be interim and partial. Even

everything about our faith. We have it all in fragments. “Do not try to hold me,” says Jesus, withdrawing. It’s a powerful symbol for the whole of John’s Gospel: Jesus is the one who is beyond holding, beyond capture, limitless but not inaccessible, just not able to be circumscribed or corralled or neatly tied up in a box with a bow. This spiritual enterprise starts with hope and can never depart from it. It’s also called a “faith,” for good reason—we take it on trust. “Do not try to hold me.” “Faith, hope, and love abide; these three,” said Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8).

There’s a story circulating about God sitting in heaven when a call (read “prayer”) comes in from a scientist.

“God,” says the scientist, flushed with the pride of emancipation, “we don’t need you anymore. Science has finally figured out a way to create life out of nothing. In other words, we can now do what you did ‘in the beginning’.”

“Oh, is that so? Tell me more,” says God.

“Well,” says the scientist, “we can take dirt and form it into our own likeness and breathe life into it, thus creating humankind.”

“That’s very interesting. Do show Me,” says God.

So the scientist bends down to the earth, scoops up a handful of clay and starts to mold it into a form.

“No, no, no . . .” interrupts God, “Get your own dirt.”

A thought came to me some years ago, and it has returned many times when I’ve struggled with my own periods of doubt. What if worldly reason gradually eroded everything that you and I held precious in our faith. What if traditional religion were a psychological and social construct to help the weak get a foothold in a mysterious existence; what if we were merely accidents of creation, adrift on a planet which time and a frantically expanding universe were oblivious to. What if in some way there could be offered some searing proof that there was no God, and that Jesus was just an extraordinarily good man, no more. What would I do?

Well, I tell you in all honesty—I would still have hope, I would still believe. I would still want to follow Christ. I would believe because a life needs a moral center, and I could find none with more integrity than his. I would believe because a life needs the power of that rare sort of love which washes over us from the cross—the place of execution of a good and decent man. I would believe because I know that my worst moments are when I get wrapped up inside myself, and my best are when I can forget myself in favor of another. And that is resurrection in action.

I would believe because my own experience would make me *doubt* with a frantic passion that God did not exist. Because nothing can rob me of what I have known and felt: the remembrance that I have, from time to time, felt something from without—within; felt “strangely warmed,” as John Wesley did; felt the intimacy of a personal presence. I would believe because I could not run my life on so slender a thread as reason alone, that reason, which once held inviolate the principle that a great canopy shielded earth from watery chaos, would not even now be subject still to amendment.

I would believe because the sheer genius of the gospel message hinges not on reason, which separates by intellect, but on faith, which reason sometimes hinders, but which excludes no one—no one. I would believe because our earth, being like a tiny atom in a vast cosmic ocean, makes all the more compelling the evidence that God has visited us, even unto death. I would believe because the more I do study Scripture the more I realize that it is infused with something not our own, a wisdom that is infinitely deep with reconciling love. I would believe because the Church still is, even after two thousand years, in spite of humankind’s often times corruption of it. I would believe because lives have and are being constantly changed for the

good, and we can take no credit for it. Because we can touch the body and the mind, but we can claim no power to regenerate a soul. I would believe because I could not believe that those hundreds of thousands, even millions who gave their lives in faith were merely deluded fools. I would believe because so many, like yourselves, have touched the same wellspring of hope, and because we share so many common experiences as the outcome of our faith. I would believe because I think it is no accident that deep within ourselves there is a basic part of us yearning to breathe free in the still, sweet air of God's pure presence. And I could not believe that the one who told us these things could mislead us, or was himself mistaken.

For all these reasons, and more, I would believe. Amen.