

“From Despair Hope Will Rise”
Easter Day, April 17, 2022
Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

It’s tempting every Easter to just let the story speak for itself. We should be able to do that, right? It’s a powerful story. It can stand on its own without any context or interpretation. But if that were true, then why did the gospel writers go to all the trouble of telling Jesus’ story in the first place? Why not just skip to the end? Obviously, context does matter. It makes a difference to know what lies behind a story like this one in John’s gospel or the vision we’re given from Isaiah.

Isaiah offers this vision of the future to people whose present is a disaster. Imagine being among the population returning from exile in Babylon. Israel was in exile around fifty years, so many of the returnees were born in exile. The only memories they had of Jerusalem came from their parents and grandparents. So, their expectation in returning may have been a little unrealistic. They’d been raised on images of Jerusalem as a jewel and the temple as majestic. What they found was a city of rubble and the temple in ruins. Can you imagine their disappointment? Their despair? How were they ever going to rebuild? Where would they even begin?

It is into that reality, in their disappointment and despair, that Isaiah speaks this word of hope: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” From despair hope will rise. It’s possible the people can only embrace this hope from the depths of their despair. Only when we’re at our lowest can we reach up to be rescued.

So, that vision from Isaiah doesn’t just drop out of nowhere. It’s spoken into a particular reality, a reality of deep pain and despair, because only then can it be heard. This is what we’re taught in scripture over and over, and Mary Magdalene’s story is no exception.

It’s hard for us to relate to the trauma she must have gone through. She saw someone whom she loved and had devoted her life to following, arrested, tortured and publicly executed. It must have been devastating. Her whole world crumbled before her eyes. I’m a big fan of action movies, hero movies, but one thing about them, not the only thing, but one thing I’ve come to find distasteful is how casually they treat violence. People are portrayed experiencing it and witnessing it and after it’s over just walking away, going on with their lives, as if nothing had happened. We know trauma doesn’t work that way. It changes us. When Mary goes to Jesus’ tomb on the Sunday after his burial, she’s not the same person she was a week ago.

She goes there, I think, looking for solace, some kind of closure. She hopes to find it in the one thing she can do for him now. She can wash his body and make it ready, make it decent

for proper burial. So, to discover it missing only adds to her trauma. That's why she stands there weeping inconsolably at the tomb; why when she sees two angels in the tomb it doesn't mean anything to her. The only thing that can penetrate her grief is her name, spoken by Jesus. The confusion and joy must have washed over her like a tidal wave. From despair hope will rise.

That's the meaning of the stories of resurrection in the gospels. Hope rises from despair and Mary's joy cannot be contained. She thought all was lost only to find it's not over. God is not finished with her. I can't talk about this story without noting that only Mary in John's gospel and only Mary and the other women in the other gospels actually go to look after Jesus' body after he dies. They are heroic in their courage. All the men are in hiding. It's the women who are brave enough to risk being spotted as followers of this condemned criminal. And these women go on to become the first apostles, the first messengers of the gospel. If we take nothing else away from these stories, at least we know they intended to describe a world where women and men are partners in proclaiming the good news. There was never meant to be any inequality between them.

But now that we know what Isaiah's vision meant for the returned exiles in Israel and what Mary's encounter with Jesus in the garden meant for her, what do these stories mean for us? Turn on the news, read the paper, look at Twitter for three minutes and you know despair is rampant in the world. And for some of us all we need to do is look at the condition of our own lives, the losses we've endured, the disappointments, the burdens of fear and guilt we carry, and despair seems like our constant companion. There's no escaping it. But what we keep hearing in the stories of scripture is our despair is not the end. God is doing something new.

The question is, can we be open to what God is doing in the world? Can we see the new heavens and new earth forming before our eyes? What can we do to place ourselves in the midst of God's new creation and encounter the Risen Christ calling us? I think the first thing is to own the reality of despair. We cannot turn away from what's happening in the world. And we cannot live in denial of what may be happening in our own lives. God is calling us to enter the grief of the world, to take on the world's pain, and to face our own personal grief with courage.

But from despair hope will rise. This is the constant refrain of scripture. Hope will rise because we're the ones called to bring it. When we meet the world's pain with compassion, with generosity and with justice, hope will rise. When we allow ourselves to respond to the compassion and generosity of others, to see the presence of Christ, to hear Christ calling our name in those around us, hope will rise. What resurrection teaches us is whatever our circumstances, however desperate conditions in the world become, God is not finished with us. God will meet us in our despair and hope will rise. Hope will rise, and so will we. Alleluia!

Amen