

“Still Hope Rises”
April 20, 2025, Easter Day
Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

In my understanding of how empires or totalitarian states work to subdue populations, the first thing that has to happen is to eliminate hope. Usually that's done through overwhelming force. That's how the Roman Empire operated. The people in Jesus' day and in the decades later when the gospels were actually written, experienced a kind of brutality that was impossible to resist. All the gospels are written in the shadow of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. No one reading these stories could have failed to understand just how powerful and lethal Roman rule could be.

The story of Jesus' passion, his arrest and crucifixion, is a testament to that power. It set the population against itself. Jew arrested and persecuted Jew. That's how Rome wanted it. It was much easier to control a population that was at each other's throats than one unified against a common enemy. Jesus was a victim of the Roman strategy of divide and conquer. He was a victim, and so were the Jewish officials who participated in his execution. They were all under the authority of an Empire too powerful to resist.

That's why when the women went to the tomb where he was buried, they knew exactly what to expect. They expected to find the beaten body of their beloved leader. I don't think any of them went there grudgingly. This was the last, tender act they could offer to someone they loved and admired. They went there to grieve together. And there was so much to grieve. Not just the death of a man who had shown and taught them so much, but also the loss of a possibility for the future he had opened up to them. In a society where women were often dismissed and ignored, he saw them. He heard them. He taught them. And now it was all over.

I really think it's important that we try to imagine the depth of their disappointment. The forces of evil, embodied in the Roman occupation of their country, had won against the goodness of God Jesus revealed. The women who go to the tomb at dawn on that first day of the week probably had not slept all night out of fear and had resigned themselves to the inexorable reality of hopelessness. If he, with all his wisdom and his popularity, with all the things he had done and said, if he could be executed by Rome, then what hope was there for anyone?

The story of resurrection comes to us from the deepest disappointment and despair we can imagine. At the darkest moment of our lives, when all seems lost, resurrection insists still hope rises. Say that with me: Still hope rises; still hope rises.

To fully appreciate the power of that claim, we need to look around us and acknowledge the hopelessness so many are living with in our world. For families in Ukraine seeing their communities bombed, their children abducted, their lives shattered; for residents in Gaza being forced from their homes, their hospitals and schools demolished, their children starving; for immigrants in our own country, afraid to speak up, losing fathers or brothers or sons to detention and deportation, terrorized in a country where they thought they'd find refuge; for all of these it may feel as if there is no hope. And for us who are watching but feel powerless to intervene, who

see injustice and mistreatment, yet have no resources, no agency to help, it feels as if there is no hope.

The women who make their way to Jesus' tomb carry all of us with them. When they're asked by a stranger, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" we are the ones who need to answer. Why have we given up so easily? Why have we lost hope so quickly?

Jesus' resurrection teaches us that in spite of a world where powerful forces are allowed to intimidate and silence and imprison to cause us despair, still hope rises. And so long as we are breathing, hope can rise in us.

But only if we go out and tell the world about it. Like the women who run from the tomb, we must go and announce hope rising. We do that by refusing to remain silent in the face of mistreatment and denial of due process for immigrant detainees. We do it by advocating for programs that provide hunger relief and early childhood education and healthcare for people who are poor and struggling. We do it by insisting our leaders represent the needs of their constituents above the needs of oligarchs and corporations. We announce hope rising by meeting the forces of hatred and fear with the overwhelming power of love.

That's the vision God reveals through Isaiah when we're told the day will come when they'll no longer suffer from high infant mortality and short lifespans. The day will come when they'll live in homes they build for themselves and not be at the mercy of absent landlords for their shelter. The day will come when they will raise food from the earth to feed their families and not be worked to death for nothing in return. The day will come when there will be peace and tears will be wiped away and none will hurt or destroy ever again.

That's the world God longs us to have. But as the great Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not." We are the ones who must run from the tomb and announce Jesus lives. We are the ones who must go into the world where there is injustice and fear and despair, where people are overwhelmed by the power of forces beyond their control that have taken hold of their lives and ground them down, we are the ones who must tell the world in spite of all that frightens us and intimidates us and keeps us silent, in spite of all that: still hope rises. Still hope rises! Still hope rises! Alleluia!

Amen