**IS IT TRUE?**

**John 20:1-18**

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 Father and your Father, 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.

**SERMON – Is it true?**

Easter is one of those Sundays – everyone comes. Much like Christmas… Everyone wants to celebrate. Everyone knows the story… everyone wants to hear the story…It makes us happy; it gives us hope; and maybe for one day of the year, we get to feel really good. I don’t completely understand it – how do we celebrate something that we don’t really get. Or maybe I am the odd one out… and don’t get me wrong. I believe it completely… I do. But is this what maybe makes us look a little cuckoo. This and the virgin birth and Jonah and the whale.

See, Jesus got himself in a lot of trouble, just being the guy he was. The one that hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors, who healed on Sundays and forgave people their sins. The one who took on the religious establishment and turned the world upside down, who cared for the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized. In fact, he got himself into so much trouble that one of the twelve betrayed him, he was captured, tortured almost to death and then nailed on a cross until he died. That was on Friday, lest we forget how much suffering went together with the miracle of today. Some of his followers took his body and laid it in a tomb.

In the darkness on the third day after their rabbi’s execution, three women check one last time to make sure they have everything they need. Jesus had been robbed of a proper Jewish burial as his death came right on the verge of the Sabbath. Mary and the others have prepared to return to Jesus' tomb, prepared to do what they know to do - anoint his body, pray for him, weep for him. They come to the tomb and they know what to expect. Jesus has died and had been buried and should have been in that tomb. The tomb should have been a quiet, still, predictable place. The Twelve are hiding in a locked room with other disciples for fear they will be found out as followers of Jesus.

The women arrive at the tomb and looming large is an insurmountable obstacle between them and their task. The women know they don’t have the strength to budge the great stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. As they walk to the garden, they wonder, “Who will roll the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” But as they came upon the tomb, they realized that the stone has already been rolled away. It was not in its place. And the tomb was empty. Well, except for the grave clothes, the head cover, the young boy, the angels. No wonder they were distressed, stupefied and scared. The women who first came to the grave that Sunday morning, had a hard time believing it. In fact, they were afraid, we read. Actually, maybe it depends on which one of the gospels you read. We had two choices today – the Gospel according to John, which we read today, and the Gospel according to Mark, which is really awkward. The original version stops almost mid-sentence – they fled, because… Now, since then, some thought that Mark did a pretty poor job of a happy ending and finished it for him. In John, Mary weeps, in Mark, they ran scared… No wonder they told "no one anything." Who would have believed them anyway?

There is no way a mere mortal can get an easy handle on what happened at Easter. What took place is outside all our normal ways of understanding things. It transcends all attempts, ancient and modern, to define it. There was neither pre-existing language, nor subsequent religious or philosophical concepts adequate for that Easter happening. No advanced scientific method and technological know-how to explain it; no adequate category to make sense of what took place. And those people of two thousand years ago were in exactly as the same position as we are today. They had no way of getting a handle on the resurrection.

We struggle. So we should. How can any of us explain something that is supra-natural, something OTHER, in words drawn from the natural world in which we live? We can’t.  But we hang in there and try. Those people around Jesus were no more gullible than sophisticated intellectuals of the twenty first century. The dead were buried and stayed there. They were certain Jesus had been butchered, entombed, would stay there like every other human being. He would never be seen again on this earth.

Then came the third day. Inexplicably their Master, Christ Jesus, was alive again! This awesome new thing had entered the human story. Inexplicable yet true! But this story of Jesus rising from the dead in a transformed state is hard to swallow. Right?  Isn’t that how we would be in a similar situation? Put yourself in their shoes. Would you readily believe such a far-fetched tale told you at dawn by a young man sitting inside a tomb?

Like a fairytale, really. Almost too good to be true. It is something like the prince who came to kiss Snow White after she died from eating a poison apple, and she came back to life. We love to believe it, don’t we, even when it makes no sense; such a happy story. Or do we really believe that someone can be dead three days and get to be alive again.

They couldn’t find him. He was gone. It could not be explained. They did not quite understand. Or maybe it was just the poor light at dawn. Frederick Beuchner calls it “the darkness of the resurrection itself, that morning when it was hard to be sure what you were seeing.”  As our Gospel reading from John describes it, the disciples stumbled around in the half-light on that third day after Jesus’s crucifixion, running here and there in their confusion.  Was it an angel, sitting in that unlit tomb?  Were those shadows grave clothes?  The stranger lingering outside — was he the gardener?  “Early in the morning, while it was still dark…”  That’s where Easter begins.  It begins in the dark. You came looking through the frame of death, ready to anoint a body, but the fact is, Jesus is alive and even if you can't grasp it yet, the fact remains: He has been raised. Time to reframe and begin looking for Jesus among the living - not in the graveyard, but in Galilee.

The fact is, the resurrection happened in total darkness.  Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret.  No sunlight illuminated the event.  No human being witnessed it.   And even now, two thousand years later, no human narrative can contain it.  It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down, because it’s a mystery known only to God.  Whatever the resurrection was and is — physical, literal, metaphorical, symbolic — its fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes.  All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death.  Somehow, in the utter darkness, God saved the world. And we believe.

Two thousand years after that, on this Easter Day, Christians all over the world pause to remember. Even though hatred and narrow-mindedness and evil and fear took Jesus to the grave, we are inspired to remember how God’s light refused to be darkened, and God’s voice refused to be silenced. We remember that Love burst from its place of burial out into the world. Like the women, our nature is to resist it, even to be afraid of it. But we are also amazed, because we have sometimes seen how love can overcome hatred, inclusiveness can obscure narrow-mindedness, good can overshadow evil, and courage can take the place of fear.

As the dim light of sunrise illuminates an empty tomb on Easter morning, we are sent out in both terror and amazement to face whatever is before us. When we see these things, when we live these things, we are writing the continuation of God’s story:  that God’s love is not entombed. And this is how we know it’s real.

Resurrection is not like anything we might expect. Resurrection announces that God has not given up on the world because this world matters. Our lives matter. Resurrection says that what we do with our lives matters. Every act of love, every kind deed, every moment of grace matters. Every one of us, *everyone* has a place in God's world, has meaning in God's world - everyone of us matters to God.

The story of resurrection is not to be told by standing and staring into the tomb. It is to be *lived* by turning and running headlong back into life. It is bearing in our very bodies and souls the promise of Easter—the promise of resurrection, the promise of new life—as we encounter new people and situations, or the same old people and situations. It is living in hope that the depth of the tomb is not God’s final message to us.

Every day you decide to live your life in faith and not in fear, you are writing the postscript of this gospel. Every day you share God’s love with a fellow human being, you are writing the epilogue of the story of Jesus. We face forward and run toward a new day, where the future remains shrouded in mystery, but bears the imprint of resurrection.

What about you? Would you have the courage to leave the empty tomb and go back to Galilee to take up the task of being Jesus’ disciple now that you know the way of discipleship led to the cross and the grave? Even with the triumph of Easter, we can fearfully retreat now that we know the cost of discipleship.

The challenge is to push ahead. It is to follow where Jesus leads. The path is open to each of us. Jesus is still out there beckoning, “Follow me” to those who listen. We only need respond by faith and say yes to the invitation. Because in doing so, we know it is all true! Christ is risen and is calling us to follow. To continue to leave an empty grave, and let the love burst forth in our daily lives.