

While it was still dark
Menno Mennonite Church
Easter April 12,2020
Online Worship

Purpose: To place the resurrection story within the context of hope as God finds us where we are.

Message: God finds us as we are where we are and brings us hope.

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

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24 On the first day of the week,
very early in the morning,
the women took the spices they had prepared
and went to the tomb.

² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
³ but when they entered,
they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

⁴ While they were wondering about this,
suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed
like lightning stood beside them.

⁵ In their fright the women bowed down
with their faces to the ground,
but the men said to them,
“Why do you look for the living among the dead?

⁶ He is not here; he has risen!
Remember how he told you,
while he was still with you in Galilee:

⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners,
be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ”

⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb,
they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.

¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James,
and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb.

Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves,
and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

While it was still dark. It is such a throw away notion—the once upon a time of the story. It is the place and time where those who were going about their business— the business of grief and grieving—set about their work. We jump over this on our way to on the way to the good part—the empty tomb, the weeping Mary, and the risen Christ—that we don't spend a whole lot of time considering it. But this is the context of the resurrection. This is the time and place of Easter, at the moment of the women stepping up to see if all of this was true. Sooner or later in the process of loss someone has to stop and confirm whether all of this is true.

I think this is precisely where we find Mary on the way to the tomb. She is alone, according to John. Matthew has her with another Mary and Mary Magdalene. Mark has two Marys and Salome. Luke has a small crew of women off to take on a task. But here she is all alone. Yesterday was the Sabbath and this purpose was off the table and out of the question. But now as the sun is rising or about to on the new week, she is going to pay her respects; she is going to see whether the horrific events of Friday were real after all. It's natural. It's normal. It's what is expected. But what she finds is anything but.

It is easy to forget this many times in the midst the excitement décor and traditions of Easter. That it starts here. Going to check whether all of this is real or not. My role, often, is seen to be the one to stand up and proclaim and explain in the most rational way that I can why all of this is real. It is tempting to think that if I can lay out the proof and evidence in just such a way you the jury of my peers will come to the unassailable conclusion that Christ is risen. The problem is, I am not sure that I can actually accomplish that on this Easter or any Easter. Not because I fail to believe with my heart, mind and soul that Christ is alive—I do without apology, without equivocation. Nor am I getting hung up really on the needling inconsistencies of the gospel accounts or the precision of the who what when where why of the whole thing. Rather, I come to this conclusion because I think that the reality of the resurrection is not one that hangs on historical fact, but is something else entirely. It is real—but not in the sense of our realness. Empty tombs are not our brand of reality, not life as we have known it. It is not a medical explanation or a logical proof that can be argued beyond doubt. I just don't think it works that way.

But it is true. It is real. This I proclaim and this I know with every fiber of my being. It is just not one of our ordinary 2 plus 2 equals 4 sorts of truth. It is a truth of our believing. It is truth of our knowing. It is a truth of our living out. Our believing does not, of itself, make it

true; but it is something that we have seen and heard and experienced in our own lives; truth which tells us something beyond what mere logic can tell. It is a truth that tells confirms for us the nature of God and the mission of the one God sent, that tells us that there is a reason for hope even when we are confronted by the difficult realities of our world. It is a truth that allows us to celebrate even in our most deathly of days. It is a truth that will sustain us even when it is yet dark.

Since we celebrate Easter once a year, it is easy to fall into the trap that what we celebrate today is a historical event of 2000 ish years ago. But it is bigger than that. This is the day that God with us changed everything forever more. Today we celebrate the beginning of the reality of resurrection for all of us; As such, Easter is not something we remember, but is a present reality that we live each and every day. Rowan Williams, the retired Archbishop of Canterbury phrases this idea well: *the believer's life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment and enlargement--a pattern, a dance, intelligible as a pattern only when its pivot and heart become manifest. The believer shows Jesus as the center of his or her life.*

That is a far harder thing to celebrate than an act of history. What we celebrate today in a way that few of us have ever even dreamed of is something else—the reality of a risen Christ that meets us where we are and how we are, even here, even now. It means that we proceed in this world not within our own concept limited concepts of the real, but in the framework of a kingdom that has come to this world and has changed everything. If we are honest, this is a bit scary. It is far easier to celebrate a historical event than a reversing of the world as we know it. A Christ risen both then and now means that we are given a Christ who comes to use each time we come back to see if all of this is true, and in turn invites us to come and follow him beyond what ever would put us into the grave—metaphorical or otherwise. The empty tomb, as important as it is, is not the conclusion of a long story, an occurrence to be marked, but is an invitation to something else entirely different, if we are willing to follow on behind. We are so used to our broken world, so used to the way things are, so accustomed to the powers that be that we may not be prepared to contemplate a Christ that calls us beyond all of that to the prospect of resurrection of all things even while it seems so dark. But that is precisely what we are given, and this is who we are invited to follow this day and every day. And that can be intimidating. We

are never quite sure how embracing resurrection might change us, where it might take us. Resurrection, new life, does not fit our agendas, our life plans, and often takes us off to places we can never predict and sometimes struggle to control. But it is the God life to which we are called if we are willing to embrace its truth.

Easter has come. The tomb is empty. Life springs forth. And that makes all the difference. The stone has been rolled away and so to are the barriers that which seems unmovable is not. The powers do not have the final say and death is not the final chapter. Life is the rule in all things and through all things, even when we would think that our world, our situation, even our very selves are beyond hope, beyond healing, and might remain forever broken. Resurrection reminds us that there is more to this world than what is before us, what we can see, touch, and buy, no matter how pervasively it may appear to the contrary, because there was more in store for the one who was come and called us to follow; more going on at the cross than just the tragic death of an innocent man put to death as a rabble and a nuisance. Easter has come and resurrection has come, and the barriers are no more between God and us, between the purely holy and the persistently sinful. The grave is empty and so too is the well of guilt and punishment that would say that we are not good enough, that there is no reason to hope, no reason to struggle, no reason to persist in a world in desperate need of resurrection. We are invited to live resurrection every day, living past the fear of what might happen if we risk and into the promise of what can happen if we chose to live differently, testifying each day to the risen-ness of Christ.

This is not to say that the darkness does not at times find us. We know that pain still exists. There are places in our life, in our world that remain seemingly entombed. Our world today is a vastly different world than when we set off on our path toward Jerusalem yet again. We find ourselves unsure of many things, wondering what if and may be. I cannot say what is about to be, or how long this transition may last. But what I can say is that this is precisely the season where resurrection comes into play. Because resurrection is a process as well as an event, both personally and corporately. I wonder; even here in these dimly lit times, where might resurrection be shining through? How might the reality of the Kingdom coming, already here be calling us into something that we never expected? What new life are we being called to envision, embody, and to live in the name of Christ right here, right now? It will not be a life without risk,

without cost. But I know that it will be a life worth living. How might we be called to die in order that new life might rise?

It is precisely because that resurrection is an occurrence that happens “when it yet dark” that it is relevant today. We open ourselves to resurrection. Because the testimony of the women at the tomb is true, we can reject the untruths that power trumps compassion, that might creates its own justice, that the future holds only despair. Because they were not delirious in declaring the incomprehensible truth of a risen savior, we declare the death is never the final word, the final wall erected to shut us off forever, but is only the worst that the world can do, and the opening to the whole new world of God’s reign and God’s kingdom forever more.

We, like Mary keep going back to see if all of this is true, and are invited to be amazed each and every time.

Easter has come. Easter is coming. Easter is already here. The tomb is empty. The walls have been destroyed. Christ is arisen, and the cosmos is forever new. May this be our invitation, our present reality, and promise forever more.