

Easter Day A
Peace, Seattle
April 16, 2017
John 20:1-18

FROM TEARS TO TESTIMONY

The confrontation unfolded right there on the church grounds, and in the end three lives were lost and an entire community was shattered. A few weeks later, from the pulpit, the pastor confessed that there'd been a gap in her formation as a Christian; a gap that, in the wake of the tragedy, had been shown to be a chasm.¹

Growing up, she explained, she'd memorized the Apostles' Creed with one omission: the phrase HE DESCENDED INTO HELL. Her childhood pastor, who did not believe that Jesus had descended into hell, had personally crossed out that line in every hymnbook the congregation owned. Consequently, she'd never integrated Jesus' descent into hell into her theology.

But something had changed, she [told her people]... "This congregation has descended into hell. And if we have had to go down into hell, it is comforting to know that Jesus has been there before us, and can show us the way out."²

Mary comes to the tomb before dawn and discovers that his grave is opened and his body gone.

Distressed, she runs back to tell others, then rushes back with them to the scene of the crime. THEY'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO, Mary thinks. But they don't.

They stare, like Mary, at the rolled up head cloth and discarded wrappings. Then, turning around, they head for home—not rushing now, as before, but plodding; as uncertain as Mary is about what all this means.

They go. But Mary stays; and Mary weeps. Deep, guttural groans rise up from her very depths; raking sobs she makes no attempt to control.

Face to face with the unexplained empty tomb, Mary lets grief prevail.³

How many places around the world call for our collective grief and tears these days!

- An elementary school in San Bernardino;
- a Coptic church in Egypt
- A bridge in London;
- a town in Syria

Mary's tears mingle with them all; with all those mothers, fathers, children, lovers, strangers—for whom no words exist to describe the utter loss they feel; the hell they're going through.

The pain and suffering in our world is everywhere, spilling over wherever we look; when we look.

So we begin this Easter day as Mary did. We sit with her, and weep.

¹ A story shared by Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer in *Post-traumatic Ministry*. *Christian Century*, March 29, 2017, p. 22

² Ibid.

³ I'm indebted to Ayanna Johnson Watkins for language surrounding this scene from John's *gospel*. *Living by the Word*, *Christian Century*, March 29, 2017, p. 20.

But though weeping is how this Easter story begins, it is not how it ends.

MARY! — He calls her name and her world shifts... **MARY!**
The one she thought was utterly lost is standing there in front of her!

RABBOUNI! she cries, and Mary herself is given new life.⁴

Sisters and Brothers, what does this day mean?

It means death is not the last word. It means, when our lives and the world are going to hell, we can trust in the Risen One to show us the way out.

Now, truth be told, some beg to differ with this conclusion. There are some who have a vested interest in chaos (and we've never seen that more clearly than we do now days). Their goal is to make us, finally, suspicious of all testimony.

But that is not where followers of the risen Christ go!

In a world overrun by fake news, where social media trolls and conspiracy theorists do their level worst to make us think nothing and no one can be trusted, we gather at the empty tomb to claim as our own the truth of the Risen Christ.

As the Risen Lord opened Mary's eyes by calling her name, so he opens our eyes, and calls us to be his witnesses and partners by seeing, supporting, and participating in resurrection as it unfolds in our communities and in our world.

What does that look like?

Resurrection is the new Mary's Place shelter opening in White Center, and the interfaith community furnishing it for families.

Resurrection is converting roof runoff into Raingardens, and thus helping to filter and protect the waters and creatures of Puget Sound.

Resurrection is five young women inspiring a congregation to build a Tiny House so one more homeless family can have a safe, dry, and hospitable place to live.

Resurrection, new life, is right in front of us, if we open our eyes. But that doesn't mean resurrection is easy. Just as Edixon.⁵

After fleeing violence in Honduras, Edixon entered foster care through the unaccompanied minors program of Lutheran Community Service. Adjustment was really hard—different language, different expectations, different food, different way of life. But his foster mother Mollie and his supporters at LCS walked with him every step of the way.

"I never thought that I'd be graduating from high school," says Edixon. But "they believed in me, and were always there when I needed support."

He's moved on to College now, pursuing a degree in Civil Engineering.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Read more here: <https://refugeechildren.net/you-can-help/edixon/>

No, there's nothing easy about resurrection. The truth of the matter is, a death is first required.

Not long ago I heard an interview with [Diane Foley](#), the mother of [James Foley](#), a journalist who was killed by his ISIS captors in Syria.⁶

She spoke of a letter that one of her son's fellow captors, Daniel Rye Ottosen, delivered to her after he received his freedom. It wasn't a written letter, but a letter James had asked Ottosen to commit to memory. When he was freed from captivity, Ottosen called Mrs. Foley and dictated to her what he had memorized.⁷

From Ottosen she learned what a strong presence her son had been among other captive journalists. How, in the midst of their suffering there was also a joy they shared in the company of one another.

She learned that James was feeling her and her family's prayers – that he was not despondent but instead very hopeful and compassionate to those in captivity. That he brought some of his fun-loving spirit to that dark place.

"I was very... thankful to hear," she said, "that Jim was one of those who had a tremendous amount of strength. So he was feeling our prayers. And he had some peace within him, thank God."

Jim "was drawn to some of the drama, some of the...rawness of the conflict zones. He also... was very touched by the suffering of the civilians in the midst of it all. I think he felt...he needed to bear witness to the suffering of others."

In the end, death, for James Foley, was no surprise.

But what is a surprise, is that Christ is risen, and death is not the final word...

What is a surprise—what turns sorrow to joy—is that the ONE who called Mary's name will call ours—and in that moment declare: I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END AND BEYOND.

The Power that raised Jesus from death raises us too.

The Power that raised Jesus calls us to show the world what resurrection looks like!

The rhetoric of distrust and suspicion has always been present in our world.

But on this day the naysayers and death-dealers are overcome by the testimony of a community of the living.

Not because we shout louder! But because we've learned to build one another up, and to build up our communities and world, through habits of hospitality, through acts of mercy, compassion, courage, and self-sacrifice. Actions we learned from Jesus.

To say CHRIST IS RISEN is to confess that there is a POWER afoot in the world greater than the forces of cynicism and death; a POWER cloaked in vulnerability and suffering, which accomplishes what all the world's superpowers could not: sends death packing.

⁶ This New York Times op ed piece included background on Mr. Foley's execution: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/opinion/james-foleys-execution-and-the-question-of-ransom.html?_r=0

⁷ You can find the full interview here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=344036631>

As the Risen Lord opened Mary's eyes by calling her name, he opens our eyes, too, daring us to believe that no suffering, no tears, no descent into hell, is beyond the reach of the Risen One.

Sisters and brothers, today our Risen Lord calls you by name, calls me. And with this naming he turns us from tearful bystanders into joyful witnesses, who bear this profound and liberating news to all the world:

CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUIA! AMEN.