

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Easter Sunday
Sunday, April 9, 2023
10am

Text: John 20:1-18 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

For the last six weeks, this congregation has been wandering the wilderness of Lent. For forty days we have sought God in the spiritual wilds. We have recalled stories of physical and spiritual wilderness. We have wondered together where God is when we are in the wilderness of doubt, loneliness, suffering, sin. We remembered how Jesus faced his own wildernesses of temptation, grief, and pain – until, at last, he was abandoned to death on a cross. On Friday we laid him in a tomb and rolled the stone shut.

Every year we rehearse this story. We know how it ends. Easter Sunday comes with trumpet blast and song, and once more Jesus rises from the dead. And while there are years the shadow of the cross feels especially deep, it takes light to cast a shadow. The darkness of Good Friday is always backlit by an Easter sunrise.

Today, in the church calendar, our Lenten wilderness journey comes to an end. But the reality of our lives rarely fits the neat lines of a calendar. If you came to worship today with a grateful heart singing alleluia, you are welcome here. But if you arrived feeling like you are still wandering in the wilderness, know that you are most welcome, too. Perhaps you have come with more sadness than joy, more doubt than faith, more resignation than hope. Perhaps the wilderness is your norm and all you feel is tired.

However it is with your soul today, *this day is for you*. This day is for the lost, the lonely, the weak. This day is for the devastated and the despairing. This day is for the sinner, the skeptic, the struggling saint. This day is for those who mourn and for those who rejoice. Easter does not happen on the other side of our wilderness experiences, when our troubles have resolved and our hearts are light. The Good

News has no meaning when we separate it from our pain. No, Easter happens right smack in the middle of our wildernesses.

This is true today and it was true on the first Easter. Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb not with joy, but grief, in a spiritual fog. In her heart lay the same cold question that was in the hearts of every person who loved Jesus: *If this man was indeed the Son of God, why did God let him die?*

The only certainty Mary and the other disciples felt on Easter morning was the certain finality of death.

Which is why, when Mary discovered an empty tomb, her first thought was not *He's alive!* but *Dear God, what has happened to his body?* When Peter and the beloved disciple arrived, they shared her distress. Our gospel writer says that when the beloved disciple saw the loose grave clothes, he believed (v. 8). But his belief was not a belief in the resurrection. The beloved disciple simply believed that Mary was telling the truth; the tomb was empty, and Jesus' body was gone. What could they do? So, he and Peter turned away and went home.

[pause]

Many people saw Jesus die but very few saw him alive again. The resurrection happened in the pre-dawn hours without any eyewitnesses. Why Jesus rose in darkness and then chose to appear to only a handful of his followers is beyond me. It would have resolved a lot of misunderstanding if he had appeared to Pilate or the religious authorities. But clearing up confusion was apparently not on God's Easter agenda. Can we blame Peter and the beloved disciple for shrugging their shoulders in exhaustion and numbly walking away?

Only Mary remained at the tomb, weeping. We bless her for her tears because our Easter story hinges on her decision to stay. This decision makes her the first witness to the Risen Jesus. She is the first person to undergo the Easter transformation from grief to joy. And this transformation begins *in* her wilderness, not *after*.

Mary's experience at the empty tomb is one of bewilderment. It captures the essence of the wilderness – both words share the same root, *wilder*, which means

“to lose one’s way in a wild or unknown place.” A grave with a body gives order to the experience of death; it is a physical place to plant our grief. But the empty tomb strips Mary of even that small, stabilizing comfort. She barely registers the angels’ appearance through her distress. And even as she turns to find Jesus standing right in front of her, she is so lost in her grief that she mistakes him for the gardener.

It is only when Jesus calls his friend by her name – *Mary* – that the miracle penetrates her heart and then her eyes and her mind. Jesus speaks her name in love, and the sheep recognizes the voice of the shepherd. With rising hope and joy, Mary cries, *Rabbouni!* – a term of endearment that means “My dear rabbi.”

Mary’s recognition of the Risen Jesus is the moment that Easter breaks through into her personal wilderness. The wilderness is not gone – she does not yet fully understand what has happened or what is to come – but Mary has experienced resurrection. Because what else is resurrection than joy in the midst of sadness, hope in the midst of despair, life in the midst of death? If Mary had not stayed, she would have missed this miracle. But she did stay. She planted herself in the wilderness and saw the horror of an empty grave transform into a symbol of life.

[pause]

Friends, the wilderness is always with us, to one degree or another. As the saying goes, in life we are in death. But on Easter Sunday, God flips the script and reminds us that in death we are also in life. Whatever wilderness we carry inside us, whatever lonely and wandering path we tread, it is precisely there that we will find the Risen Jesus.

Psalm 27 says, “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (v. 13). Today we confess our belief in that goodness. This belief is not a matter of knowledge; it is a matter of the heart. To claim the Easter story as our own is to orient our hearts toward the hope of resurrection. And this hope empowers us to plant *ourselves* in the wilderness and trust that God is transforming even the most bewildering spaces.

When Mary runs to the disciples and proclaims, “I have seen the Lord!” (v. 18), she becomes the first person to preach the Good News. And her proclamation has

become the glad cry of every person who believes in the Risen Christ. For while we did not witness *the* resurrection of Jesus firsthand, we are still called to be witnesses *of* resurrection. Faith is the discipline of keeping our eyes open for the Risen Christ. Jesus is unbound, alive, and at work in our world!

Our mission as Christians is to preach the same Good News that Mary preached – to go into the world and point to all the wilderness places where God’s resurrection power is breaking through. We share in God’s ministry of resurrection wherever we cultivate hope: in nursing homes, at sickbeds, in shelters and soup kitchens, disaster and war zones, in cemeteries. We show up in these spaces, sharing the goodness of the Lord. And in this way, we become together the risen body of Christ in the world. The world does not need to wonder where his body has gone. Instead, the world will look upon our deeds of mercy and compassion and say, “Yes, we too have seen the Lord in the land of the living.”

On this Easter Sunday, may you hear Jesus speak your name in love and recognize the presence and power of the Risen Christ in your life. And may you share that Good News in every wilderness space you encounter.

Alleluia!

Amen.