

2026 Easter

John 20 Easter Text

A few years ago as my mom was nearing her 88th birthday, she began realizing she was having memory issues. Not normal, everyday things that most everyone of every age experiences but things that get doctors involved. Naturally, this made her anxious. It made my dad, siblings and I anxious, too. I have walked beside many people over my 30+ year pastoral ministry – all of them were anxious, too. For all who are close to the person, such a shift is a serious perspective shifter, a wakeup call that refocuses priorities and sharpens focus on things that were always there but perhaps taken for granted.

Sometimes we need a jolt to wake us up, to get our attention. In 2014 Napa experienced a significant earthquake that literally jolted people out of bed. Wildfires have part of our collective story in pronounced ways over the last decade. News of horrible mistreatment of innocent people engaged in nonviolent resistance. News of acts of war. More news of cover ups and intentional delays and ignoring legal orders – all of these have a way of waking us up. Sometimes we wake up from a nightmare only to find out that it's not a dream. We're living in it. How has that been true for you? When were you forced to wake up to reality?

Roughly 600 years before Jesus was born, the people of Israel were living through their own nightmare. A neighboring superpower – Babylon – defeated them. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins. The Jewish temple – the center of their entire theological ecosystem – was destroyed. Worse still, Babylon forced most of the people of Israel into exile. The great truth-telling prophet, Jeremiah, spoke to them in their despair. His words – spoken as directly from the heart of God – were a contrast to the horror they were experiencing: *I have loved you with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself. This isn't the end of the story. I will be with you even in exile. One day you will come home and will rejoice again* (see [Jeremiah 31:1-14](#)). He was speaking hope and love into despair, when their world was falling apart. Not unlike it was for the disciples and Jesus' closest followers that first Easter weekend.

Imagine the roller coaster the disciples had been on. A week earlier their leader was being cheered by a throng of fans. Everything pointed to Jesus moving into prominence. That Thursday night, I imagine the air had to have been alive with hope and promise. Until reality came with the force of armed agents of the Temple itself, forcing their way into their AirB&B, dragging Jesus away without cause. The nightmare just got worse and worse. No justice for Jesus, no rule of law, and no way to challenge it. He remained calm as his oppressors grew evermore violent. First the Temple leadership. Then the Roman Empire. Beatings. A rushed call for his execution. His humiliation. His death. How horrible to watch this play out. Can you imagine the agony? Hope lost. The one who epitomized love and grace squashed like a bug. The movement was apparently over.

But then, a voice with the tone of Jeremiah spoke: “Mary” ([John 20:16](#))

Mary Magdalene, which we have learned in recent years can be translated as a title more than a reference to a village in antiquity. She must forevermore be known as Mary the Tower. Mary on par with Peter in terms of influence and esteem. But Mary wasn't towering in this moment. She was cowering in fear and despair even as she faced the horror of the tomb, even an empty tomb. First, he's executed. Then, his body stolen. One humiliation after another. She is beside herself in grief. The pain is deafening. She is blinded by her agony. Then she hears her name.

C. S. Lewis famously said that pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Sometimes we only have ears to hear when we are leveled. Our suffering can turn into liminal space – thin space when it seems like we are more about the perceive The Divine - where we are able to hear our name being uttered by the Spirit of God. “Mary.” How powerful and poignant. How comforting. Love is right there with Mary, speaking her name.

I have had such times in my life when I felt completely leveled. I have been in the depths of despair, crying out for help. And I have experienced Love coming alongside. Speaking more than words – being present somehow. I was not alone in my pain. Somehow despite my suffering there was also a surprise: joy. Not a joy that wipes away all the

problems and pain, but a joy that I wasn't alone on the journey. There was ground under my feet. God, the Ground of Being for us all, was holding me up.

"Mary" wasn't all that was said, however. Something profound came next, embedded with instruction to clue in the disciples who ran back to the Upper Room in fear. "I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." This wasn't just about Jesus – was it ever? This news was about Mary, and the disciples, and everyone who hears it. I am going home – my home, your home, our home. Mary was included in the hope of homecoming. So are we. All of the homecoming talk about what lies beyond is metaphor, of course, yet it all conveys the hope of joy to come. That joy doesn't eradicate our present struggles, and it certainly was never meant to absolve us from any responsibility to keep on living and loving every day of our lives. No – it was meant to inspire us to live with even greater boldness because joy is with us and will be with us because joy is everlasting.

Slow Poke Pete got in trouble for really believing this. He extended the welcome mat to people others wanted to exclude. Why? Because he watched the presence of God transform their lives, resulting in great joy. His conclusion that he told the key leaders of the early church? There is peace with God for all in Christ ([Acts 10:36](#)) Joy showed up in surprising places.

The Apostle Paul wrote from prison to encourage the Colossian church. He was in prison because his life was transformed from one of the jerkiest jerks to one who was willing to be beaten and eventually martyred for preaching about the Grace of God. Why? Because he was transformed by the Love of God. Do you know what that resulted in? Joy! He reminded his readers, "Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory." Christ is your life! Christ is everlasting! Hope and Joy and Love and Peace are eternal! Rejoice!

The Psalmist wrote a hundred or so years after Jeremiah as people were returning to their homeland. There is still struggle. There is still pain. There will be tomorrow, too. But we have THIS day, and THIS day contains Joy. THIS is the day that that Lord as made ([Psalm 118:24](#)). We will rejoice and be glad in it because Joy in with us even now. Love is with us even now. Both will be with us in all of our days ahead. This Psalm is widely used to this day in the Jewish tradition recounting God's faithfulness to be with us and to bring us home.

As my mother's memory issues became pronounced a few years ago, she shared her concern with my dad, who also spent decades in pastoral ministry even though his titles changed. Wanting to ease my mom's anxiety, we referred to Psalm 118. He wisely said that we don't know what lies ahead, and worrying too much about it won't really help – that's why Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow. My dad reminded her of the great truth of this song: THIS is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice – reset ourselves with joy – and be glad in it. Don't miss the JOY of today, now. And so that's how they live. She still struggles with her memory which continues to decline as she's about to turn 91, and my dad/caregiver 93 this week. Their age shows in every possible way. They both know they are in their last season. Yet because they have lived their entire lives in the awareness that Love has always been with them and will continue to hold them whatever comes, they have lived in great joy. May the same be true of all of us.

"He is risen" is more than a refrain we repeat to each other on this day, it is a radical, revolutionary statement of resistance whenever death in all of it's facades shows itself. We will be tempted to cower in fear, but JOY is victorious over death. Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, Oh death is your victory? Where, oh death, is your sting? (1 Cor. 15:55-56).

"He is risen" is a reminder of this day, Easter Sunday, which is a reminder to always ask the question, WHAT DAY IS IT? The answer to that question is always the same: THIS is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it! May the truth that this Lord, this God, this Love is eternal root deep within you, so that no matter what temporary reality you may face, you may rejoice in the face of it.