

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹When we gathered for Holy Week services last week, we already knew how the story ends. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are unique in that they lead us into Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and death. And then stop.

And even though we end those services in silence as we contemplate Jesus' death, they don't ask us to forget the resurrection. We, Christians today, are Easter people 365 days a year.

But two thousand years ago, on those two nights – and on Saturday, the disciples didn't know how the story ends. Whatever hope they maintained in Jesus' promises, his arrest and crucifixion left them traumatized, uncertain, and afraid.

And so, when that first Easter morning came, they were still in shock at what had happened to their teacher and their friend. They were still coming to terms with his death and the fact that he was no longer with them.

Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb by herself early that morning. Jesus' body had been properly buried by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea on Friday, so there was no reason for the women to do it after the Sabbath.

So, when Mary went to the tomb, she went to grieve. Much like we do when we visit the resting places of our loved ones.

And when she found the stone removed, it's understandable that she thought Jesus' body had been stolen or moved elsewhere. What other reason could there be, right?

And after a lot of running and back-and-forth with Peter and the other disciple, who also didn't understand what had happened, Mary was left by herself in the garden, weeping outside the tomb, trying to figure out what to do next.

Only then did she look inside the tomb and see two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been. And then she had a conversation with the gardener. Or so she thought.

She didn't recognize Jesus by sight, or even by voice at first. It was only when he spoke her name that she recognized him, and probably reached out to embrace him.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/editors/easter-brutal-world>

And the Bible translation we use this morning doesn't quite get it right when it says Jesus tells Mary not to touch him. The closer translation is, "Do not hold onto me" – which makes more sense. Because Jesus has somewhere else to be. And when he finishes speaking with Mary, so does she.

He commissions her to go and tell the disciples what she has witnessed. And she does. And we are here today, continuing to proclaim Christ's resurrection.

It's an easy proclamation to make in our part of the world, inside these walls. With the flower cross, and the music, and the overall energy. How can we not shout, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" How can we not respond, "Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!"

It's an easy proclamation to make in here where, just for a moment, we're disconnected from what's going on outside these walls. But it is exactly this proclamation that connects us to what's going on outside these walls.

In the US, we are living through a time when hope is elusive and fear is the dominant voice. The news is a fire hose of the current administration's bigotry, greed, cover-ups, and deception.

Social media posts from that same administration grossly misuse the names of God and Jesus to justify the current war with Iran and other instances of violence. And other posts and presentations even go so far as to draw parallels between our president and Jesus.

²We know how the story ends. And we aren't the first Christians to wrestle with death-dealing events like these, but they are part of our reality. And sometimes we get caught up in what's in front of us, and it prevents us from recognizing the risen Christ.

³And so we remember that Mary Magdalene's experience of the resurrection calls us to a patient faith that perseveres when it faces uncertainty, and holds onto hope of new life even in the midst of ongoing forces of death.

⁴And we remember, too, that as the church, we share Mary's commission – her vocation – to boldly witness to the risen Christ's presence in our world. Even when we can't perceive it. And especially where it seems impossible.

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/editors/easter-brutal-world>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/vigil-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-201-18-21>

⁴ Ibid

⁵Last Saturday, March 28th, Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land released a video message for Easter. In it, he walks through the Old City of Jerusalem, which is silent because of the current conflict.

In a place known for heavy tourism and pilgrimages at this time of year, no one came. Shops are closed. Historic Christian sites are closed. No one is walking the Via Dolorosa. Any celebrations, including those for Passover, are small and private because there is currently a ban on large-group and public gatherings.

But Bishop Haddad reminds us that it is from these places of emptiness that we proclaim resurrection. Because the story does not end on the cross, but begins in the empty tomb.

Because, as he says, Easter is a celebration of life that overcomes death, a celebration of peace that conquers war, a celebration of hope that overcomes despair, and a celebration of love that challenges hatred.

There are a lot of things in our world that seek to traumatize us, or keep us off balance just enough to question what we're seeing. Things that make us think death has the upper hand and will win in the end.

But scripture, and our faith, tell us otherwise. We know how the story ends.

No one who went to the tomb on the first Easter expected resurrection. No one was excited to see if Jesus was "still there" - to discover whether the resurrection had already happened. When they found the tomb open and empty, they assumed that someone had stolen the body.

They thought death had won.

But we remember that Mary Magdalene's experience that day demonstrates faith that is patient, that perseveres, and holds onto the hope of new life.

And we remember, too, that as the church, we share Mary's vocation to boldly witness to the risen Christ's presence in our world. Even when we can't perceive it. And especially where it seems impossible.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1457712929427466>

Because our proclamation isn't limited to this space, or even to this day. Because we are Easter people 365 days a year.

And Easter is a celebration of life that overcomes death. A celebration of peace that conquers war. A celebration of hope that overcomes despair. And a celebration of love that challenges hatred.

That is our proclamation today and every day.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.