

News from Another World
John 20:1-19

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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. . . . and she saw two angels in white and saw Jesus standing there Jn. 20:1, 12, 14

We have been waiting desperately for news to come to us from the CDC in Atlanta, for news to come to us from the COVID task force in Washington, DC, for news to come to us from the Governor's office in the State Capitol, and for news to come to us from the offices of the Dane County health department. That news has come at long last, and we are tremendously glad, for it means we can be here in the sanctuary once again to see one another and to praise God together.

All that is wonderful news, of course, but there is still greater news for us today. It doesn't come from Atlanta or Washington. It doesn't come from the state or the county. It is Easter news. It is news that comes to us from another world. It comes from the spiritual, supernatural world that is just beyond our sight and surrounds what we know of time and space and life.

The news that comes to us from this other world is told by the rolled away stone. It is told by the empty tomb. It is told by the angels seated where the body of Jesus used to lie. It is news told by the Risen Christ himself. It is told in the scriptures about him, in the songs of faith, and by the church through the ages.

Listen for the headlines that come today from that spiritual realm.

Easter's news is that the powers of this world do not get to do the final deciding.

Run through your minds the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday: the arrest and the trial of Jesus, his cruel treatment by the soldiers, his mocking by the crowd, and the cross itself. Picture those events in your minds and you will no doubt see how various human powers tried to take charge and have the decisive vote. Conspirators told lies about Jesus in an attempt to keep their power. Soldiers exercised violence, using their whips to show who had power and who did not. The crowd, made up, we can suppose, of equal parts fear and ignorance and frenzy, went along unthinkingly with popular opinion and believed their loud shouts for the release of Barabbas and for the crucifixion of Jesus outweighed any reasoning otherwise. And both Pilate and Herod, representatives of government, placated popular opinion because it was in their best interest. All these forces – the lies of the conspirators, the violence of the soldiers, the fickleness of the crowd, the spinelessness of the government officials – all these forces believed they had the upper hand and that they had won.

But that was Friday and this is Sunday. Sunday came – Easter came – and eternity broke through with different news. Those who tried to get rid of Christ had to reckon with Christ. As weak as those earthly forces made Jesus he proved stronger still. They put him down but he rose up. They put him in a tomb but he walked free. The Eternal God proved to be the power that ruled the day, not earthly lies, not the weapons of violence, not the volatility of public opinion polls, and not the holders of government office. The Eternal God stepped forth from the spiritual realm and rolled back that stone the powers of earth thought was so decisive and final.

That Easter news is front page today. Christ is alive. His truth will prevail. His formidable power will be and is at the controls even now. Lies are destined for defeat. Violence will never gain the good. Steadfast love will outlast public opinion. And the scepter that rules will remain in Christ's nail-scarred hand. Easter's headline is that though the powers of this world always exert and express themselves, they are no match for the righteousness of Christ and will never have the final say.

Easter's news is that the problems you face can be overcome.

The Easter story as it comes to us from the Gospel According to John is full of human problems, all of which seemed more than the people in the story could manage. John puts much of the focus on Mary Magdalene. She was heartbroken because of the cruel death of Jesus and perhaps even half-cursing those no-work laws of the sabbath that kept them from taking care of the body of Jesus with the proper respect he deserved. She may have been sleeping very little since Friday in the first place, but she got up at first light on Sunday, after the sabbath had ended, and made her way to the tomb to give Jesus the dignity of a proper burial. John doesn't say she worried about how to move the heavy stone at the doorway of the tomb, but the thought had to have crossed her mind. When she found the stone rolled away already, it was more a puzzle to her than a proclamation. Jesus' missing body thrust her into total confusion if not panic. Where was he? She went to get some friends – some men – to come help; but they looked and left. Mary was alone with her tears. Her problems were insurmountable.

But then the Risen Christ spoke her name and suddenly news from another world broke into her soul and her loneliness and pain and sorrow were all overcome. There wasn't anything like rapid insight or complete understanding, but she saw there was answer in Christ to all that troubled her.

That Easter news is front page today. The headline that comes to you from the spiritual, supernatural world is that there is not a single problem you face that cannot be overcome with the help of the Living Christ.

Do you want examples of the truth of that claim? Perhaps you will say to me what one minister said to another. The two were talking one day. It happened it was a time of quarantine because of an outbreak of scarlet fever. They were socially distanced outside and had to speak to each other from opposite ends of a tennis court. One had just written a book and asked the other what he thought of it. The second said the book was good but when it came to demonstrating the truth of his claims all that the first had done was to show biblical examples. Where were

examples from life today to demonstrate the truth the author wanted to tell? Where were instances of the spiritual realm here and now?¹

In like manner you may ask me to say where examples are today to show there is not a single problem you face that cannot be overcome with the help of the Living Christ. My answer is, look around you! Examples of the helpful and redemptive power of Jesus Christ aren't restricted to away-off biblical times; they are all around you in your circle of friends and in this church. We know – because many of us are – moral failures who have found the grace of a second chance. We know – and many of us are – people who have been absolutely shattered by grief but who have come back to laugh again when we thought there were only tears. We know – because many of us are – people who have found every door of opportunity locked to us, shutting us away in abject disappointment, only to find an unexpected and marvelous door suddenly stand open. And we have seen – right here in these pews – men and women face death with steady eyes and a buoyant spirit. The news from another world is manifest among us. Christ is alive! And because he is alive the headline of Easter says the problems you face can be overcome.

Easter's news is that the purpose of your life can be found.

Mary Magdalene was entrusted with a sacred mission as she stood outside the empty tomb and talked with the Risen Lord. She was given a purpose. She was the first person ordained to preach the gospel message. Her congregation was to be the other disciples and her sermon was to shine the light of the resurrection on their lives and the days ahead. She was commissioned to go and tell the others this news from another world.

Now that is a word for individuals. In one of his books Jimmy Carter talks about the hyphen that appears on gravestones.² You know the one. The person's birth date is listed and the person's date of death is also given. Between the two is a hyphen. The fullness of the life that was lived is not in either of the two dates but in the hyphen. And the question is, "How will you spend your hyphen?" To what use will you put your length of years? What will be your role? What will be your contribution? What will you do that will both give you satisfaction and have some positive impact on lives around you? The Lord Christ – who lives beside you each day – can help you find answers to all those questions. He can give meaning to your life.

This is also a word for our church. Thankfully we have been allowed to return to public life. But surely we know that the church is not called back into public life for its own sake. The word to Mary was "Do not hold me . . . But go . . . and say" (Jn. 20:17). Jesus isn't risen and the church isn't called back into public life just so we can cling to him and hold him tightly in the space of our building. He comes – he lives – to give us a mission of working out in the world for his sake and in his name.

An old southern preacher once said "Life never becomes truly songful till it is tuned and touched by the skilled fingers of a worthy purpose."³ You as an individual, and the church of

¹ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 119. The two ministers were Howard Thurman and E. Stanley Jones. Jones was the author of the book and Thurman the critic.

² Jimmy Carter, *Living Faith* (New York: Times Books, 1996), p. 236-237.

³ Clovis G. Chappell, *Sermons on the Parables* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), p. 62.

which we are a part, can find in the Living Lord the mighty purpose that can make our lives songful. That news of Easter is front page today.

On the last day of February people in south central England saw a fireball in the sky. It was a meteorite, a fragment from some distant place in the universe. A piece of it broke as it sped through Earth's atmosphere. It landed on someone's driveway in the Cotswolds.⁴

Well, here, now are some pieces of blazing truth that come to south central Wisconsin from another world. Let them land in your life where they can give you hope and comfort and insight and joy. The news is this. Christ is alive. He is alive indeed. And because he lives the powers of this world do not have the final say, the problems you face can be overcome, and the purpose of your life can be found.

⁴ Katie Hunt, "Rare meteorite that fell on UK driveway may contain 'ingredients for life'," CNN, March 8, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/08/europe/uk-meteorite-extremely-rare-scni/index/html>. Accessed March 9, 2021.