



“Mary’s Sermon: What Remains?”

Pastor Jan Shannon

April 23, 2017

Scripture (CEB):

John 20:19-31

Jesus appears to the disciples

¹⁹ It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” ²² Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

Jesus appears to Thomas and the disciples

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus, ^[a] one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

Sermon:

Today's sermon is the result of our church FUNraiser event; the most fun to be had while raising money. Every year, Pastor Andy offers a sermon, for sale, as it were, to the highest bidder, and that person gets to choose a topic or scripture, or whatever they want, and Pastor Andy uses that as a basis for a sermon. Last year, I decide to get in on the fun, and offer one of my sermons to the good folks of Westminster. I forgot who I was dealing with. This church has deep, thoughtful, intellectually curious members, and Mary Rupert, who purchased this sermon, is surely all those and more. So, when I opened the email from Mary, and read the first line, I shouldn't have been surprised to see this:

“Hi Jan, here is my request for a sermon topic. It begins with a quote from Jungian psychologist, James Hollis.” Jung...Carl Gustav Jung...the Swiss [psychiatrist](#) and [psychoanalyst](#). “Among the central concepts of analytical psychology that Jung developed is the idea of [individuation](#)—the lifelong psychological process of differentiation of the self out of each individual's conscious and unconscious elements.” Seriously.

Mary asked me to comment on a quote from a Jungian psychologist, James Hollis. The quote comes from Hollis' book, *Swamplands of the Soul—New Life in Dismal Places*.

“The message of loss and grief and betrayal is that we cannot hold on to anything, cannot take anything or anyone for granted, cannot spare ourselves acute pain. But what abides is the invitation to consciousness. What is constant amid inconstancy is the summons to individuation. We are neither our point of origin nor our goal; the former is long gone; the latter forever recedes as we move forward. We are the journey itself. Loss, grief and betrayal are not just dismal places we must unwillingly visit; they are integral to the maturation of consciousness. They are as much a part of the journey as the places where we feel respite and would tarry. The great rhythm of gain and loss is outside of our control; what remains within our control is the attitude of willingness to find, in even the bitterest losses, what remains to be lived.”

Mary asked me to address these questions: How do we bring our relationship to God into this picture? How do we find what remains to be lived and live it? How can our relationship with God help?

For us to address this question, I need to take you back in time. Not long, just a few days. A few days before the scene described in the passage that John read to us. Just a few

days, and yet, within that brief time, so much has happened. Why are the disciples hiding from the authorities? Why does Jesus' entrance fill them with joy? Most of you know the answer...because he was dead. Our text tells us it is the first day of the week, Sunday, so let's go back to Friday, for a moment. Friday, when Jesus died.

The man they loved. The man who had called Peter and Andrew away from their boats. Called Matthew from his job as a tax collector, hated by both his employers and his own people. The man who healed Mary and gave her a place among his disciples. The man they saw heal the sick, feed the poor, and the man who poured his life into his disciples. The man who told them that a new kingdom was coming, a kingdom where peace and love would be the norm, where poverty, sickness and death would have no place. The man who told them He was the One who would make that kingdom a reality. The man, Jesus, with whom they lived – ate, drank, walked, and slept alongside for three years. The man they loved. He died.

There's no question that he died. They watched it happen. They saw it all. Especially the women. The women were there at the foot of the Cross, weeping and wailing, crying out against the great injustice, their great sadness, their loss. After Jesus "breathed His last," and his body was taken down from the Cross, it was carried to the tomb. We are told the women followed behind. Perhaps they followed only to find out where he would be laid. Perhaps they just couldn't bear to be parted from him, even in death. They stayed with him as long as they could. The bible tells us that they followed all the way to the tomb, and then they sat outside. The bible doesn't tell us why. They just sat there. Isn't that what we want to do, when our dreams die? Just sit there?

They stayed as long as they could, but eventually, they had to leave. It was the task of the women to prepare the body for burial, but it was Friday afternoon, and the sabbath starts on Friday at sundown. There wasn't enough time that evening to prepare his body properly, they would have to leave him there, all night. Leave him in that tomb, that place of death.

Mary Magdalene comes back early the next morning. As early as she was allowed to go out, at sunrise, she went to the tomb. She took with her the oils and spices used to prepare a body for burial. She goes to do perhaps the most personal thing you can do for another person, she goes to wash his body. Have you ever done that? Washed another person? Perhaps it was your child, or a child you were taking care of. Years ago, when my mom lived with me for a year, and had just had open-heart surgery, she was unable to take a bath, so I had to bathe her. It's a very intimate thing, to bathe another person. This is what

Mary was going to the tomb for. To perform for Jesus the very last act of devotion in her power – she goes to bathe his body, and prepare it for burial. The bible tells us that when Mary arrived, Jesus’ body wasn’t there.

I want to stop now, for a moment, and ask you to look at your bulletin cover. Mary Rupert painted that picture of Mary Magdalene. Mary Rupert wanted to portray the universality of grief. All people grieve, all cultures, all faiths. Mary Magdalene’s hair is covered in with a cloth, found in both the Jewish and Muslim traditions. There is saffron to represent the Hindu faith. When I met with Mary Rupert to discuss the sermon, she showed me that painting, and I saw immediately that it would be our bulletin cover for today. Look at it. Isn’t it beautiful? Just take a moment and experience the painting.

That’s Mary Magdalene, there at the tomb. She’s just been told Jesus isn’t there. Look in her eyes. What is she feeling?

She feels lost.

She feels empty.

What is she thinking?

Is she thinking?

“Where is He?

What do I do now?”

Preparing a body for burial is women’s work. The rituals around death and dying are some of the most closely held cultural ceremonies in any society. It is part of the grieving process. While Mary is bathing Jesus’ body, and applying the oils and spices, she will cry. She will remember. She will grieve. But there is no body. How will she grieve? Not only is Jesus gone, gone too is Mary’s opportunity to properly grieve his death. All that has been taken from her.

The bible tells us, that Peter and another disciple also see that Jesus’ body is gone, and they return to the place where they are staying. Then Mary has an encounter that changes everything. John 20:11-18 says this:

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve

put him.” As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.”

When everything seems lost, dark, when all her dreams are shattered, Mary receives a vision. The vision is bright, shining, beautiful and new. But it doesn’t make any sense. It takes Mary a while to understand that this is Jesus, back from the dead. She doesn’t see the possibility at first, it takes a while. Jesus has to call her by name, and Mary has to be there to hear it.

I want to look at the tomb in a new way today. I want us to look at the tomb as not just a place of death, what if we consider it also, metaphorically as a womb, a place of life. The source of life, Jesus, is dead, and laid in the tomb, but if we compare the tomb with human pregnancy in the womb, we find some interesting comparisons. My wife, Deb, helped me with this idea, and a lot of what you’ll hear now are Deb’s words.

“In the womb, the placenta is what keeps the baby alive, but eventually the placenta dies. The baby can’t stay in the womb forever. The place of birth would be become a place of death. A baby can’t stay in the womb, they must leave it in order to live. Life in utero is different than life out here, in several ways.

In the womb:

- The baby’s nutrition is totally dependent on the mother in the womb.
- Lungs pseudo breath, taking in the amniotic fluid, but there is no oxygen in their lungs.
- Because there is no breathing of oxygen, circulation bypasses the lungs
- There’s a little valve just outside the heart that is open in the womb to allow circulation to bypass the lungs, and when the baby is born, this valve closes to allow oxygen from the lungs to enter the bloodstream.

The processes that are at work in utero are appropriate for that life, but those processes need to adapt to life outside the womb. There is life in the womb and life outside

the womb; both are life – but a very different kind of life. What works for one way of living, won't work for another. Sometimes, if a newborn gets stressed, the little valve opens back up, like the baby wants to return to the womb. "Hey, I don't like it out here. I want to go back." But if the little valve does open up, it causes big problems, and if the situation is not rectified, the baby will die. There is no going back. A baby can't go back in to womb. That old way of life is over, and the baby must adapt to the new life. Just like a baby must be born in order to live, so we can't stay at the tomb, we have to move on.

Mary asked me, "How do we bring our relationship to God into this picture? How do we find what remains to be lived and live it? How can our relationship with God help?" I think we look to the disciples to find our answer. The disciples are hiding in the upper room, afraid of the authorities. Finding themselves without their teacher, alone and scared, they wait. Mary tells them she has seen the Lord, well, that's great. Amazing. Some probably believe her, and some not. But even if Mary *has* seen the Lord, what does it mean?

Then Jesus appears to them, at least to the ones who are there. Jesus said, "Peace be with you." Jesus knows they are scared, so He offers them peace. You know what this tells me? It tells me that it's OK to be scared. Jesus doesn't admonish them for their fear, He offers them peace. When we experience loss or grief, and the big changes they bring to our lives, it's OK to be scared. And, as Mary Magdalene showed us at the tomb, it's also OK to cry. Jesus didn't reprimand Mary either.

I've always been struck by Jesus next action. Jesus shows the disciples his wounds. Jesus knows how unusual this situation is, after all, Jesus friend Lazarus died, too. Jesus knows the pain of losing a loved one. Jesus knows people die, so He also knows that the disciples will need some proof that it's really Him. He shows them His wounds. What this says to me is that, when we experience loss or grief, it's OK to be confused. Jesus knows that humans experience the world through our senses, so he gives them things for their eyes to see. When we are going through a grieving process, and trying to adapt to our new life, it's OK to ask for new information to get us through.

What we really stuck with me after reading through this section of scripture, is how long this transitional time is for the disciples. Easter is a season, not just one day. Pastor Andy and I are wearing our Easter stoles this Sunday, too, and we will wear them for the whole six Sundays of Eastertide. Easter season lasts 40 days. Why is that? It's the transitional time between Easter and Pentecost. People need times of transition. People need time to process. We see that in this story. The disciples were there in that room for a

week. We also know from scripture that they stayed in Jerusalem for 40 days. When we are going through a grief process, it's OK to take some time to adjust.

I also want to point out that the disciples went through this period together. Don't try to go it alone. People aren't built to be lone rangers. We need each other. When you are going through a time of grief, don't go it alone. Allow others to be with you in your grief. It's what we are here for.

Just as a baby needs to transition from life in the womb to life out here, the disciples had to transition from the life they had with Jesus, to a new life without Him. From what they knew, that old life, to what will be, the new life. They have to figure out how to now be disciples without a teacher. Followers with no one to follow. When I was going through a transitional time in my life, I learned a saying. It has proved useful on more than one occasion since: "Embrace your new reality." It means that we need to take ahold of our new life, whatever it may look like, and not stay attached to the old.

You know, they could have gone back. Gone back to being fisherman, tax collectors, and ignored the resurrection. If they had decided it was all too much. Too much change. Too scary. They could have gone back, but if they do, there will be consequences. What would our world look like if the disciples had given up on the dream, because now it looked so different? What would our world look like if the disciples had not become the apostles, the ones who spread Jesus' gospel of love and peace to the world?

The prospect of life without Jesus was sad and scary, sure, but what about the prospect of this new life? Of course, they were all happy, ecstatic even, to see Jesus alive again, but...what does that mean? How could it be? This new reality is life-altering! Death is supposed to be permanent, but death couldn't contain Jesus. This is wild! It's impossible! The prospect of this new, wild, unexplainable, uncontainable, LIFE, is perhaps even more scary than death. The prospect of resurrection life could have been enough to send them all running back to what was familiar and safe. I think a lot of Christians are terrified at the prospect of living into the possibility of life that can conquer death. I think what we often want from our faith is just some peace, some joy, but not too much. Not enough to move us away from what is familiar and safe.

I found this great little poem yesterday, by Wilbur Reese. It's called *Three Dollars' Worth of God*.

"I would like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough of Him to equal a cup of warm milk or a

snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love my neighbor or stoop to help someone in need. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack, please. I would like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please."

Just as every birth is a reason to celebrate, so we celebrate the resurrection. Resurrection is a new life – a new way to live. In birth, there is work and pain, but there is also joy. In moving from one life to another, through the loss and grief that change brings, we will find there is yet more to be lived. It will be different, maybe very different than the old way, but there will be life. My wife, Deb, wise woman that she is, said it like this: "So, I think even in our loss, losing a child or job or spouse, a dream or even our hope for the future; that because Jesus is our Hope, hope that life can come from death, because we have His example of resurrection, we realize that old things must die so that new things can grow."

Mary and the other disciples thought their dreams had died with Jesus. They could not see the life that was waiting for them on the other side of resurrection. Mary couldn't see that her life would be so highly valued, that she would be made a saint. Peter and the other men couldn't see that they could preach, like Jesus did. They could proclaim the gospel. They could heal. They could perform miracles. They could change the world. They could see none of that at the time, but there was SO MUCH MORE LIFE TO COME!

Mary's question for me was, "How do we find what remains to be lived and live it?" I think we give ourselves a break and allow ourselves to be human. We allow ourselves to be scared, to cry, to be confused, and we allow ourselves a time of transition to adjust to our new reality. Find help from your family and friends; don't try to go it alone. Lean on those whom God has put in your life, and lean on God. As people of faith, we live in hope that the new life, whatever it is, will hold peace and joy, and yes, even love. "The great rhythm of gain and loss is outside of our control; what remains within our control is the attitude of willingness to find, in even the bitterest losses, what remains to be lived." If we are willing to look, I believe that we will find there is so much more life to be lived. God has so much more for us than we could ever imagine.

That is "what remains" – so much more! Amen.