

## **Is it true? Hope Beyond All Expectation**

Sermon 14 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 21, 2019

*John 20: 1-18*

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

I love the sound of those bells our children ring, each time they hear the word, "alleluia." There is a certain courage, and confidence, and an unhindered joy that enables them to interrupt worship with the loud ringing of those tiny little bells.

Alleluia!

For my child and for many others, I suspect, the promise of those bells is one of the primary motivators for coming to church on Easter Sunday. It's not the new dress or bow tie, it's not the flowers or the family picture on the church grounds. It's the bells and the uninhibited right to ring them right in the middle of church! ...Alleluia!

I wonder if we adults would ring them with such exuberance if they were placed in our hands on the way into the sanctuary? I suspect not. I know that I would look around to see if others were ringing. I would wait until the second or third alleluia to be sure I wouldn't be ringing (and thus disrupting worship) alone. How do I know? Because I've had my phone ring when I wish I had put it on silent. I've had the giggles and not been able to keep quiet when everyone else around me is silent. I know the pain and embarrassment of being the one making the noise when it is not the time to make noise.

I'm sure that as a child I would have rung the bells with freedom and excitement. I don't know when exactly it happened but somewhere along the way, I grew up and learned that my actions had social consequences. My childish, hope-filled, innocent, excitement turned into a more dignified non-committal silence. So if you gave me an alleluia bell, I cannot say with certainty, that I would ring as boldly as our children do today. And that's a shame.

During the season of Lent we have been exploring the theme of wilderness. We've talked about the ways that God calls us deeper into the many different wildernesses of our lives. We've read stories from the Bible about temptation, doubt, darkness, and the vulnerability of stepping out into broad daylight. These stories speak to us because in the wilderness of our lives, we all face trials and we are all vulnerable. It's part of being human. But what we learn along the way and when we read scripture is that not only do we endure these trials in the wildernesses, but we are also shaped by them. They change us.

In today's scripture reading, we meet Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. Mary had been following Jesus as a disciple for quite a while. We know from the Gospels that she was one of the most loyal followers during his ministry. She was there when he fed the hungry, there when he touched the lepers, and there to bear witness to his arrest, trial, and

crucifixion. After all that she has been through, when we find her at the tomb, she is grief stricken, stunned, terrified, and in pain.

I wonder if it was the grief and pain from the journey that clouded her ability to respond with uninhibited hope and courage when she saw the stone rolled away early that morning. After all that she had been through with Jesus, (his life, his ministry,) surely she of all people should have known that he was alive! Surely she would have been the first to shout, "Alleluia, Christ is risen!"

But that's not what happened. Rather than proclaiming the good news of the resurrection, she assumed the worst and cried out that Jesus' body had been stolen. She certainly had good reason to doubt anything positive could come from this hopeless situation. After all, she was at the cross long after the other disciples. She was there when Jesus was beaten and crucified, when he breathed his last. I wonder if it was too much for her, like it was for the others: the pain of it all.

Often our pain diminishes our capacity to hope. The losses and disappointments in our lives mount up and teach us to guard our hearts, to live life with caution and to limit our hopes to that which is safely contained within the realm of possibility.

Mary's tears are a sign of lost hope.

In this immediate state, resurrection is not even a possibility for Mary, she just knows that Jesus' body has been stolen. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," she proclaims to Simon Peter and the other disciple, who quickly ran back to the tomb with Mary to see for themselves. Upon arrival, the two went into the tomb only to find the linen cloths, the grave clothes that covered Jesus' body just a day or so ago. After seeing for themselves, the two other disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stayed. She stood outside the tomb and she wept.

Mary's weeping reminds us of the sisters who wept outside of Lazarus' tomb just a few chapters earlier in this Gospel. Despite Jesus' love for Lazarus and his resolve that he would live, the sisters believed that Jesus had come too late. In the same way that they struggled to imagine what a future could look like now that Lazarus was in the tomb, Mary wept for all that was lost, for the death of her friend and teacher, and for the loss of a future that she'd already given her whole life to.

Through her tears, she looked into the tomb and saw angels there, "Why are you weeping?" they ask. "Because they have taken away my Lord," she says, "and I do not know where they have laid him."

Then a voice from behind her repeats the same question the angels had asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Presuming he is the gardener, she begs for a clue as to where the body may be. But then the man utters her name, "Mary!" and immediately, she knows that it is Jesus.

In that moment of recognition Mary is finally able to see – beyond her wildest expectations – that the one she presumed dead had risen from the grave, just as he said it would be.

She embraced him and I would have too! Can you imagine seeing what she had seen, thinking someone you loved was gone forever and then there they are, saying your name, calling you out of despair and into new life?!

I could imagine that we also might want to stay there, in the garden, to keep Jesus all to ourselves. Or perhaps we would want to pick back up where we left off, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead...together. ...Or maybe we would want to just take him away, and keep him safe behind walls built to protect him (and us) from the outside world. Did you see what they did to him?!

But the very next thing that Jesus says to Mary is, “Do not hold onto me.” “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to [the other disciples] and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” In other words, Mary, this is the moment of truth! The moment for you to live what you believe! The miracle of resurrection is not complete in your seeing me and recognizing who I am... you have to go and tell the others what you have seen, what you believe. Mary, you have to now go and resurrect hope where it has died.

In her book, *Jesus Freak*, Sara Miles talks about the difficulty of saying yes to this kind of calling. She describes a faith journey that is not only about establishing a shared set of beliefs and respectable Sunday School attendance, but a faith that serves meals to the hungry and a faith that heals the world by touching those whom the world has called untouchable. In the last chapter of her book, her focus shifts to what she calls the most challenging piece of being a disciple of Jesus: raising the dead. For Miles, the call of discipleship is a three-fold call: feed the hungry, heal the sick, raise the dead.

“Of all the things I thought I heard Jesus telling me to do,” she writes, “raising the dead was the most impossible to take literally. The resurrection was a logical sticking point for those who didn’t accept Jesus as divine, and even for many believers it had become merely a metaphor or a statement about principles. But I believed it: other things I’d thought of as metaphorical turned out to be real. Communion was food. Healing was touch. ...Yet what could it possibly mean to raise the dead?”

She goes on in the chapter to describe her work with a woman named Laura. Laura was dying and there was nothing any friend, charismatic pastor, or medical professional could do about it. Miles describes helping her dying friend get some things in order, paperwork like DNR’s and final wills, that sort of thing. But one day Laura had a new paper she wanted to show her. It designated a friend, Gloria, as the legal guardian of her son, Gabriel. “Gloria is going to be Gabriel’s mother.” Laura said as she handed over the

paper to be reviewed. This was the final piece of business Laura needed to take care of to ensure that everyone she loved would be cared for after she was gone. Miles continued to struggle to make sense of her call to “raise the dead” as an idea that was part of her calling as a disciple of Christ. She knew there wasn’t anything she could do to heal Laura now and she doubted even more her capacity to bring her back after death came. Miles and several Pentecostal pastors prayed over Laura, but her condition did not improve. Eventually, Laura died. Miles was among those who helped carry her body in the funeral procession. And as she walked, carrying the corpse of her dear friend, she began to look around.

As she looked she saw that “The resurrection of Laura didn’t rely on what the pastor from Agua Viva preached or what she believed, or what any of us thought about an afterlife. But she noticed a poster that Gabriel, Laura’s son, held up at the funeral: ‘Your spirit is within me,’ “and that was, quite literally the truth.” Miles writes. “I could see Laura alive in Gabriel, as he twisted [the paper sign] in his hand. ... I could see Laura alive in Yolanda and the others from AA whose lives she’d saved with her bossiness and generosity. I could see Laura alive in myself, I could see Laura alive in Gloria, - Gabriel’s new mother - in whose small, dark, unremarkable body she looked, uncannily like Jesus,” as she took Laura’s son into her arms.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview, Miles, who tells this story about her friend Laura, describes worship as the place where we all come to be raised from the dead. It is the place, she says where we come to be liberated from the deaths that haunt our lives, the death of greed, the death of materialism and militarism, the death of selfishness and self-preservation, the death of isolation and despair and loneliness, the death of believing the lie that we are not enough, the death of thinking that ringing our alleluia bells loudly and without hesitation is merely a childish act.

I would add that if worship is where we come to be raised from the dead and liberated from our grave clothes, then worship must also be the place where we learn how to unbind others. It is a training ground of sorts, where our bodies and minds are shaped to become more like those of Christ – so that when we go out in the world, we look like the good news of the resurrection! When we go out we know our calling is to Feed the hungry. Heal the sick. Raise the dead.

Alleluia is a word that is preserved from the Hebrew scripture where it is used as a superlative to express gratitude, joy, and triumph to God who has overcome. It was used to praise God for delivering the Israelites from Egyptian captivity and it is used by Christians today to praise God for defeating the powers of death. When we say alleluia, it is not a generic word of praise that is randomly magnified on Easter Sunday – it is our expression of hope beyond all expectation that life can prevail, that God can bring that which was dead back to life, that there is hope, even when it seems like all is lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from p 160 – 161.

Alleluia means praise to God who can resurrect us and free us from the grave clothes which wrap our bodies even now.

If we believe the Gospel according to John and if we find ourselves feeling like Mary did when she saw Jesus in the flesh, then we must know that the miracle of resurrection, the miracle of Easter wasn't over when Mary saw Jesus outside the tomb. It wasn't over while she was holding onto her own revelation and encounter with Jesus. Jesus said, "Do not hold onto me, Mary." ... "Go and tell." For the miracle to become complete, Mary had to do her part. So did the other disciples... And so do we!

The question for us is: are we willing to participate in the mystery of resurrection by going and proclaiming the good news in the same way that Jesus always did - liberating the downtrodden, the oppressed and marginalized... feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

Of course, it takes courage given all that we have seen in our lives. It takes courage to believe that God can raise these kinds of bodies the dead. Given what we know about violence around the world, unending wars, lives lost for no reason at all, endless suffering and pain, and the overwhelming sense that there is no path of life in the midst of all this death.

But we cannot let ourselves become overwhelmed by the grief and pain of our wilderness. We cannot let ourselves become paralyzed by our fears and insecurities. If we believe in the good news that Christ is risen, then we must also proclaim with our lives that communion is bread, that healing is touch, and that we are called to go and get to the work of raising the dead.

Maybe this morning we can begin by looking into the eyes of our neighbors, who are our companions in the wilderness. And maybe, as we look to one another, we might begin to see the love of Christ alive within us. And if we can see it, we have every reason to ring those alleluia bells as loudly and confidently as our children.

Maybe, this Easter, we can let our lives ring out like bells in the hands of children. Maybe we can embody resurrection hope that surpasses all expectation. Maybe we can sing and ring our bells loudly proclaiming the good news to all the world: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and, yes, raising the dead.

Christ is risen! Alleluia, Amen.