

John 20:1-18

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. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In Denver, Colorado, this woman, Greta Lindecrantz, recently spent two weeks in jail for refusing to testify in a death penalty case – believing that her testimony could be used, in part to keep the defendant Robert Ray on death row and eventually lead to his execution.



On the Sunday before she was called to testify, Greta stood up during the time for sharing ‘Joys & Concerns’ at her church and talked about this tough decision she was facing. The previous day she met with one of her pastors – they talked and tried to figure out a way in which Greta could both comply with the courts without betraying her Christian belief in non-violence.

Standing in that worship setting the Sunday before she was called to testify, she said that when she imagined herself testifying, her *mind felt cloudy*. But when she imagined not testifying, she *felt a weight lift from her and peace descend*. At the end of their worship service, her congregation gathered around her, laid hands on her and prayed for her and all that was to come. And the next day, Greta refused to testify and was sent to jail, being found in contempt of court after she told the judge that she would not answer any questions in the witness stand because of

her religious beliefs against the death penalty, no matter the law of the land. She continued to make that decision day after day, and each day being sent back to jail.



While Greta was being held in contempt, members of her congregation gathered to sing hymns outside the Arapahoe County Courthouse where all this was taking place. When asked about why they were singing, her pastor Vern Rempel said, “We want to embarrass the system of death with songs of life.”¹

We want to embarrass the system of death with songs of life. Friends, I can’t think of a better way to talk about Easter than that – Jesus’ resurrection is the song of life to the systems of domination that put him to death! As resurrection people, we have songs of life that need to be sung! And we have a world that needs to hear them.

¹ This story about Greta Lindecrantz comes from *The Mennonite* magazine, can be found at <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/mennonite-woman-chooses-jail-supporting-death-penalty/>



Two piles of clothes, that is all the disciples saw when they got to the tomb on that first morning —some linen wrappings on the ground and a cloth rolled up. Mary didn't even see that much.

She was too distraught.

The gospel of John tells us that Mary came to the tomb early that morning – the other gospels all tell it a bit different, and a bit the same – in *Mark* it is three women, in *Matthew* two, and in *Luke* it is “many women.” And when Mary saw the door to the tomb standing wide open, she ran to tell the disciples. *John* tells us that Simon Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the cemetery, beating her back to the tomb and found it as Mary had said, his body was gone – two sets of clothing were all that was left in the otherwise empty tomb. One set of grave clothes lying on the ground, the other wrapped up where Jesus’ head would have been. Odd, that someone should go to all the trouble of rolling it up.

John says that, when the beloved disciple “saw the clothes lying there, he believed.”

Believed what? *John* does not say. He simply believed, and without another word they returned to their homes.² And Mary stays outside the tomb, distraught, tears beginning to fall. They’re

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation," *Journal for Preachers*, 2002.

traumatized, they're amazed, they're shocked, they're afraid, and they are completely silent. In Mark's account of this story, some scholars say the best translation of the response to the empty tomb would be: "*They did not say nothing to nobody.*"³

We know that eventually, these fearful and silent disciples/followers of Jesus – they end up becoming the first to proclaim Christ to the world – we know that they head out to share the good news of all that God has done in and through Jesus Christ – almost all of them wind-up being martyred for their proclamation of the God of Jesus Christ. And so what is it that moves these disciples from hiding in fear of those who put Jesus to death to being able to sing songs of life that embarrass these system of death?

Luke says that at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry he had about 120 followers. A respectable size for a first pastorate – that is about the number of people we could squeeze into this room if we added a few more chairs in the back. And Roman historians say that at the end of the first century there was maybe as many as forty thousand Christians. That is a lot, especially if you started with only 120 – from the number of people you could fill in this room to the number of people that would fill Bronco stadium. [While that is major growth, 40,000 in 70 years – the Roman Empire had a population of about seventy million people at the end of the first century. That means that less than 1% of the population was Christian. If my math is correct, that is less than 1% of the population was Christian. In a town of seven thousand people, four Christians. Even in their massive growth, they were still a significant minority.]

³ Fred Craddock's sermon, "The Announcement" in his book *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*.

How did they go from being a defeated and fearful 120 people, to being a people of loving kindness whose numbers had grown in 40,000 in 70 years?

Was it the promises of an easy life, that if you believe in Jesus, things will go well for you? That is unlikely, as many of them died deaths of martyrs – crucified, burned, and forced to fight in the Gladiatorial arenas.

Perhaps it was the promise of wealth then, that if you give to the church of Jesus Christ, you will get back financial blessing many times more than what you gave? Also unlikely, as they began by living off a common pool of money and ‘gave to any as they had need.’

Perhaps it was their great worship styles that wowed those who wandered into their church services? This too is unlikely as the first Christians kept their places of worship hidden, and kept people to keep watch at the entrances. When you could die for being a Christian, you didn’t want any spies wondering into your worship center with a notepad and pencil, taking note of everyone who was in attendance.

Perhaps it was the easy message of God’s grace, that if only you believe on Jesus, they will have eternal salvation. Even this is unlikely, as the first Christians required a two-year vetting process for baptism and full membership into their ranks – you had to meet with a mentor who studied your life, making sure your life was living by the principles of the God we meet in Jesus Christ, before you could become baptized. It was not a simple message of accepting Jesus – they were highly concerned that you were living the way of Jesus.

As people met them, their love must have been clear – the ways they were living free from the systems of domination and death, must have been obvious to those they interacted with – they were people whose lives were songs of life.

How did they move beyond their fear? How did they follow their calling as disciples in spite of their fear? It began of course with experiencing the risen Christ. First to Mary there in the garden, when Jesus calls her by name! Their experiences of the risen Christ move them beyond their fear.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus appeared to the disciples not just once – not one appearance to simply show them he was alive and raised – but four more times. Every time he came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him. “Those appearances cinch the resurrection for me, not whatever happened in the tomb, but this change in the disciples.”⁴

As I have said before, I don't have much interest in theological debate, nor do I think we can argue anyone into believing as we do – no matter how good our facts, or how unfake our news. *I think the best argument we can make for the resurrection is the change in the disciples.* They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all of their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. No one among them is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They again and again defy the authorities. They go to prison. And they never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. In this way, their way of life becomes contagious. If anyone wants to know what "salvation" means, all anyone has

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation," *Journal for Preachers*, 2002.

to do is to look.⁵ This is how resurrection people live. Their lives of resurrection love become songs that embarrass the systems of death.

The resurrection was never the end of the story. It couldn't be – this is why Jesus kept coming to the disciples until they were ready to move beyond their fear. This is why Jesus said to Mary, “Go and tell my disciples that I am going ahead of them to Galilee...” – there was still more to be done, for Jesus and for us. *It's our story to keep living out*

Resurrection means little if it is only a future wish to have, but has little to do how we live today. Resurrection won't matter if it simply becomes a monument we point to, staying in the confines of history – it must be a present hope as people who seek to live resurrection each day of our lives. Resurrection becomes a cliché if we see it only as the last word, rather than a verb to live.⁶

But, of course, even as resurrection people – sometimes our songs of life are songs of pain.

While at Easter we can claim that the systems of death have been defeated, they still hold much power.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation," *Journal for Preachers*, 2002.

⁶ Karoline Lewis, in her article “No end to the story” at, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5121>

Many of you will remember the story of this young man MJ Sharp, who was killed in the Congo as he was seeking to do peace work for the United Nations. I think of his poor parents, they have been asked to speak about and reflect on the meaning of his death so many times, I think as we Mennonites want a modern martyr story to lift-up. Recently his mother published a letter to her son, written a year after his death – she wrote:

I often prayed God would instill in you a call that would challenge and fulfill you. And when you finally did find that passion for working at peacemaking in places of violence and suffering, we could only support you. We celebrated you and your call. And most days I'm able to be grateful for all you were able to accomplish and all the lives you touched for what truly matters.

However, I admit there are days my mother heart just wishes you had been more ordinary. That you wouldn't have had that keen mind, caring heart and passion for reconciliation and justice. Because then you, my dear son, would still be with us. You were killed because of the purposeful work you did. My heart aches with the pain of your absence...

I don't know what to say of our experience of loss that has brought any revelation or insight. I only know that the pain of your loss is overwhelming. My mother heart continues to lie in pieces. I know those pieces will someday be patched together, but it will never look or be the same. I will always love you. Know, without a doubt, I was blessed to be your mother.⁷

⁷ Michelle Miller Sharp's reflection can be found at <https://themennonite.org/opinion/reflections-end-year-son-mj-killed/>

Her son's life was a song of life in a world of death, and it cost him his life. He lived resurrection. And it is ours to live.

May resurrection be our future hope to hold – may resurrection be a way of life for us to live today – that the songs of our lives will embarrass the systems of death, so much so that even these systems of death might become convinced of God's resurrected love. May our lives be songs of life. Amen.