

“Empty Tombs”
John 20:1-18

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At the beginning of Lent, 40 days ago, we started a worship series on prayer practice. On that first Sunday I confessed that I was terrible at praying that involved silence, extended periods alone, and feeling separate from the world around me. 40 days later it feels like I issued a challenge to the universe who created all the perfect conditions to give me a once-in-a-lifetime growth opportunity. And like most growth, learning to find some semblance of prayer life when I’m separated from the world around me with ample opportunities to sit in silence, it’s been really difficult.

I’ve had times when I was filled with fear and uncertainty. There was a week when I couldn’t stop crying at the littlest things. Old grief has resurfaced with new intensity. Old struggles have resumed their fights. There has been a lot of praying during this time, but it’s mostly been of the “Are you there, God? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?!” variety. And in the midst of those prayers, there have been moments of profound gratitude that has come out in the form of more uplifting conversations with God. Gratitude for communities that reimagine how they connect to each other. Gratitude for the ways relationships have deepened and expanded in this new way of life. Gratitude for the abundance of grace that people are so freely offering each other as we realize we’re all figuring this out together. We’ve **always** been figuring out life together, but in this season we seem much more aware and appreciative that none of us know exactly what’s going to happen next and that’s okay. And for that I lift up prayers of joy and thanksgiving.

In the all the growth and new opportunities to sit in prayer with myself, I’ve come to a new appreciation for the monastic tradition of Christianity - people who cloister themselves away from the rest of the world, sometimes in small communities and sometimes by themselves, and commit

their lives to prayer.

My favorite monastic is Julian of Norwich. Julian of Norwich lived in the 1300s in the northeastern part of England. When she was 30 years old, she became deeply ill. She was weak and her body was in constant pain. She became so sick, that she wasn't expected to live. Her family gathered around her. The priest was called for and performed the last rites that are reserved for one who is very near death. Someone, perhaps her mother, placed a crucifix in front of Julian so that she would have something to fix her gaze upon in her last moments of life. But something strange happened. Death did not come. She began to see visions of Christ in her mind.

Her visions were ones of Christ overcoming death with love and of God being fully present with her in her pain. She had sixteen visions, which she remembered in vivid detail. She slowly recovered from her illness. When she was healthy, Julian transformed her life. She went from leading the kind of life any girl might have at that time to devoting her life to studying God and helping people understand God better. She moved out of her family home and into a small room, or cell, that was connected to the church. She lived the next 40 years there, alone in her cell, reading, writing, and offering spiritual guidance for the people in her community. She experienced resurrection in her own life, a resurrection she attributed to God, whom she came to see as her comforter, protector, and savior. She found such deep comfort and meaning in that personal relationship with God that she didn't need anything more than God's company to sustain and fulfill her.

Julian of Norwich's spiritual commitment astounds me, particularly because it was born from this experience of being close to death. Moving from the edge of death to renewed health gave Julian a resurrection experience, physically and spiritually. She understood what it meant to be given a new chance at life, to live a resurrection life.

When we think about resurrection on Easter, we most often think of Jesus. But when you

look at the Gospel story from this morning—and indeed—all of the Gospel stories that tell of Jesus' resurrection, the focus is less on Jesus and more on the impact of resurrection on the people around him. In John's gospel account of encountering Christ's empty tomb, we see different reactions from Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter.

Mary is the one who approaches the tomb and sees that the stone that has protected Jesus's body inside has been rolled away. Frightened by who might have done this or what they might have done with his body, Mary runs for help. She is so distressed that when she returns she does not go in the tomb like the other disciples do, she gets lost in her tears, her grief. But because she allows herself to sit in her sorrow, she encounters the angels and Jesus, coming face to face with renewed life when she expected death. Mary's experience was one of resurrection, of understanding that love continues beyond death and that love can continue to call you back to life and back to service.

Simon Peter is the same Peter who only days before had publically denied knowing Jesus. He is the disciple who was quick to say, "I'm with you all the way!" and then was the first to say, "Actually, maybe not. It's seems kind of dangerous out there." Peter had every reason to be frozen with shame for his actions, but he returns to the tomb when Mary calls him. And there he has an experience of resurrection - not just that Christ lives, but he believes in the love that Jesus talked about so often. His resurrection experience allowed him to return to following Jesus, in a new way. it allowed him to leave behind his shame and to proclaim God's love wherever he goes.

Living a resurrection life means that you have encountered something so astounding and transformative that nothing will ever be the same again. It's that moment when you realize that because of what you have experienced or what you have seen, you are a brand new person, unrecognizable to those around you, and ready to live your life with a new conviction.

Yes, Jesus was transformed through resurrection, but so were the people who were present as witnesses. Just as the disciples dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus at the beginning of his

ministry, the disciples who witnessed his resurrection made another change. They were transformed from followers into leaders, helping form the first Christian churches, working to interpret the teachings of Jesus and spread the news of his resurrection to anyone who would listen.

Being present on that first Easter morning certainly qualifies as the kind of life changing event that would lead to living a resurrection life. But you don't have to have been there to understand what it means to do this. For example, a person struggling with addiction who reaches the turning point that leads them towards sobriety understands what it means to live a resurrection life. A family previously torn apart by conflict that learns how to love each other again understands what it means to live a resurrection life. Someone who has suffered a loss and dwelled in a place of deep despair who finds healing from their grief understands what it means to live a resurrection life.

A resurrection life involves taking that point when everything moves from a feeling of hopelessness to promise, from death to life, and making that the cornerstone of every day from that moment forward. It involves recognizing the thing that brings you back to life and lifting it up, so that it can guide, challenge you and continue to amaze you wherever you might go from there. Lift it up so that everyone around you knows what you stand for and knows that you are living a resurrection life—you have seen death, you have seen sorrow, you have seen the worst there is to see, and still you have found life.

As we learned from Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved, you don't have to be the one resurrected to be transformed by one. This is the essence of why we celebrate Easter—it is our opportunity to be a witness and to then ourselves lead a resurrection life.

I believe that Easter is the most popular day of the year in almost every Christian church across the world because we yearn to experience resurrection—that opportunity to live a new life. Each Easter we are invited to witness Jesus' resurrection and be transformed as witnesses the way

the first disciples were. We enter into the drama of the story. We listen to the story of the empty tomb and we shout, “Alleluia!” because we are overcome with amazement at the chance to start again: to step free from the past, to overcome the worst—even death—and to fully embrace life.

This morning, we are experiencing this worship service in different places, in different moods, and with different experiences weighing us down. This Easter, more than any Easter previous, I am so aware of how many of us are grieving. I am aware that for all of us there will be empty places at our dinner table. I am aware that some of us are struggling with illness and depression and uncertainty for our futures. We have all come here looking for something. Searching for something that will give us hope and courage to face the concerns and stress of today.

Easter is the promise that no matter what we are going through or what the source of our pain is, the power of resurrection is available to us. Easter is God's promise that love will always overcome suffering. It is our reset button. Easter is our chance to witness resurrection and it is our opportunity to begin leading our own resurrection life. We have heard the story. We have sung the songs. We have seen life triumph over death, and we have seen that God will never abandon Jesus or the disciples or even us and because of that, we are transformed. God has planted new life and *renewed* life inside each one of us and on this Easter day, resurrection blooms around us. So how will you carry this resurrection with you? How will you take all that you have witnessed and the Good News that you have heard and how will you allow it to transform your life?

There is a popular quote from Julian of Norwich, which resonates with me on this Easter morning. It is a simple quote, but in it contains the promise of Easter and the hope of resurrection that we seek together. Speaking of a God who never abandons her people and speaking of a God who ensures that love always has the last word, Julian of Norwich wrote, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”