

“Alive in Christ Jesus”

John 20:1-18

Romans 6:1-11

When Jesus died, there were Roman soldiers standing guard, there were criminals on either side of him, there were chief priests and scribes and elders who mocked and misunderstood him. There was a crowd of people looking on at the spectacle. The twelve betrayed and abandoned him; the multitudes whom he had fed and wowed from town to town were nowhere to be found. But standing before the cross was Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joseph, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Jesus’s mother Mary, Jesus’ aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas, Salome, and the beloved disciple. After Jesus’ death, they were joined by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in caring for his body, trying to cover the marks of hatred and violence with a swaddling of perfume and love.

On Good Friday, we sang “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Looking at each of the Gospel accounts, we see that so many of the faithful wouldn’t be there. They couldn’t bear to watch Jesus die – they couldn’t bear the thought of life without him. Even those who were there – perhaps they wanted most to be together with Jesus for the last few moments of his life. Maybe they were only there to say goodbye.

As Jesus was dying, Luke’s Gospel tells us that the sun was eclipsed – the grief of this found family, drawn together by no less than the Son of G-d come to earth – was even echoed by the heavens and the earth. It was, indeed, a dark day. And as Jesus commended his spirit into the waiting hands of his Father, all they could do is watch and grieve. They had left everything to follow him. What would they do now? Where would they go? Would the Romans come after them next?

We meet Mary Magdalene, early Sunday morning, drawn to the tomb. Magdalene was saved by Jesus from 7 demons who had tormented her. She was not, as some traditions have it, a prostitute. She was a woman of some means and she financially supported Jesus and his ministry. Of all the women that followed Jesus, she was the foremost, and so it is no wonder that she returned to his side. She weeps for her savior, she weeps for (what she assumes) was a graveyard robbery – adding insult to injury. Before she saw the angels, she had lost everything.

The darkest times, for Mary, for any of us, are when things have gone so catastrophically wrong that we can't see any way out of it. We can't even imagine a way for things to be good again – or even marginally improved. These impossibly deep valleys can grow to become a chasm – an abyss that sucks the life and hope away from our present, even as they start to drag away more and more moments of our future.

I once knew a young girl, I'll call her Molly, who was really struggling. I was a counselor at a summer camp. I volunteered to work with 9-11 year-olds because they're old enough to puzzle through ideas and problems, but they're not so old that they're too cool to be goofy. The week that Molly was at camp, we started out the same way – with the silly getting to know you games and ice breakers – but she was different from the other girls. Sometimes she would play along with everyone else, laughing and having a good time, and other times she was withdrawn and irritable. A pleasant conversation snapped into biting someone's head off in the blink of an eye. Bless her heart, she had caught that dreaded ailment that all kids must face and all parents dread – she was a teenager. But she caught it early and she caught it bad. Every emotion that she had was the rawest, most intense version she had ever experienced. And you could see her start to yell at someone, realize that she didn't want to be yelling, and then run off embarrassed and ashamed.

After a few days, Molly decided that no one wanted to be her friend; no one understood her; no one cared. One evening, after she had had a rather nasty blow up with another camper, I went over to talk to her. It wasn't too long before her tent mates came in, too – sitting quietly at a bit of a respectful distance. She started to talk about how hurt and sad and confused that she was. She was having a hard time at school, things were rough at home, and her grandmother – her favorite relative – had just died. It was all too much. With tears streaming down her face, she apologized to me for behaving so badly, for hurting everyone, and making them hate her. And every single one of those girls came closer to her. Those that could touched her back or her arm and they all said, “we don't hate you.” “We're sorry things are so hard for you.” One or two of them told her about how hard it was for them when they lost family members and loved ones. They said that it wasn't easy, but that her heart would heal in time.

Why was Molly crying? Why was Mary crying? Because it was impossible, right? Because too much had gone wrong, because there was no more room for hope to grow, because no one could possibly understand. But Christ is risen. Christ is alive and the life that he lost was given for us. Christ was raised for us so that we might be raised with him – so that we might walk in newness of life.

Every sorrow, every hardship and calamity, every evil and sin in this world is answered by Christ in his dying and rising. If we fear that we suffer alone and that G-d does not care about our pain – see, Christ took on the worst pain the world had to offer in body and mind and spirit and yet he lives! He rose and so we will rise up. If we fear that we are tainted and bad, too full of sin to ever stand before the glory and beauty of our G-d – see, Christ is a sacrifice of purification, a sin offering that removes our impurity and cleanses us to be embraced forever more in the arms of G-d! Christ rose and so we will rise up. If we search our consciences and convince ourselves

that we have done wrong and could never be loved or forgiven – see, Christ took on our guilt and accepted the penalty for all time. But G-d directed our end to be life and not death! Because he lives, we will live. If we fear that death has the final word and that we are truly lost – see, Christ died on the cross, descended into hell, and broke the chains of its gates. His is the final victory! He rose from death so that we will rise up. If we fear that evil is too powerful and that the meek and the good can only fail and fall away – see, Christ conquered evil and raises up goodness to eternity.

Christ is our hope. As the apostle Paul tells us, “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” Your word for this glorious Easter morning is a simple one: live! Live with Christ! Do not despair, do not give up, but hold onto the hope of life in Christ whatever you face. Mary thought there was no other way. Molly thought no one could love her. The power of Christ’s saving death and miraculous new life is that there are no dead ends for us. G-d in Christ in Spirit is blowing through our world, bringing new life to the wilderness, gathering us into communities of work and worship, changing the world with the light that shines through any obstacle. Be not afraid, friends, for we are alive in Christ Jesus. Hallelujah! Amen.