

Life Springs Up
John 20:1-18 Common English Bible
Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” ³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn’t go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. It wasn’t with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ They didn’t yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

¹¹ Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means *Teacher*).

¹⁷ 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.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

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I recently read about an Easter children’s sermon years ago at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. The pastor asked the children, “What do you suppose was the first thing Jesus

said to his disciples after he was raised from the dead?" A boy instantly leapt to his feet, flung his arms out wide, and declared "Ta-Da!!!"

But, of course, that's not what Jesus did. He did not bust through doors to sweep in with jazz hands and proclamations of "I'm BAAACK!"

No, the first words of the resurrection are far more tender. He doesn't shout; he doesn't hire a brass quartet. He asks a gentle question to a weeping friend: why are you crying? If things are rough for you right now, if you don't particularly feel like shouting for joy, that's okay: the one who loves us, loves you, and comes to you just as you are right now. There's room for you here.

You know, there's a small, odd detail that caught my eye this week: Mary turns around twice. She's talking to the angels, and she turns around to face Jesus who she thinks is the gardener, and then he calls her name, and she turns around again. Why is that? There may be some totally logical explanation—she only turned partway the first time or something, looked over her shoulder. But this is a very carefully crafted story, so I wonder if there's meaning in her turning and turning again, as if the author wanted to emphasize that turning.

In the Bible, the word for turning is used a couple of ways. It's used when we want to talk about physical turning, turning left or right. But it's also used to talk about turning your life around. Jesus calls Mary's name, and she turns. Physically, yes, but she also turns away from how things have always been and finds something new.

We humans are sticky creatures. We get stuck in our habits and our ways. We have what you might call a human propensity to mess things up. The first theologian I heard put it that way actually used a far less polite word than "mess" things up. We inherit patterns of relationships, and we repeat them again and again, despite our best intentions, hurting others and ourselves. We get stuck and keep making the same mistakes with minor variations over and over again. It's discouraging, to put it mildly.

But there's hope in Mary's turning. She turns and finds life beyond the apparent finality of death. And when she does, she turns away from her old life, from her certainty she knows the whole story and there's no hope to be found. She turns and finds a life and love bigger than she ever imagined.

Let's be clear: this story of Jesus defeating death is not just a story about a reanimated, or somehow changed corpse that walked around. If it were, it would not be enough. It is the story of a life that cannot be squelched, that endures beyond death, in all its forms, a love too big to let our human propensity to mess things up have the last word.

Resurrection, as I understand it, is transformation. And it does not just happen after physical death. Resurrection happens on both sides of the grave. Jesus isn't the only one who experienced new life that morning. Mary, in her turning, did, too.

Recently I read a story that took place in a prison in Huntsville, TX which has the dubious distinction of having the busiest death chamber in the US. It was the story of a

man named Fred Allen, who worked at the prison and was the captain of the execution tie-down team. An execution tie-down team does exactly what it sounds like. They tie people down so they can be killed.

Karla Faye Tucker was an incarcerated woman who had been sentenced to death. Fred Allen was on her execution tie-down team. She was sitting in the holding cell next to the death chamber with Fred, waiting to be killed by Fred, she turned to him and asked him, "Are you doing okay?" She could see he was troubled, beneath his business-like exterior, and she held him tenderly in his distress, even as he prepared to kill her.

Fred went home that evening, and it felt like it'd been just another day at work. But a couple of days later, sitting in his shop at home, he heard a news account of Karla's execution, and he began shaking uncontrollably, sweating, sobbing. Karla's compassion, even at the point of her own death, opened a door for Fred, broke through his numbness, and brought him face to face with the reality of what he had done, not just to Karla but to scores of people over the years. It changed his whole life.

I am certain that on that day, February 3, 1998, Karla Faye Tucker entered a life beyond death. And I am equally certain that Fred Allen did, too. One of the lawyers who worked on her case said, "[Karla] was walking with Jesus and when she touched Fred, the captives were released."¹ It was nothing less than resurrection in that holding cell, love that would not, could not let death—in any form—have the last word.

This is how whatever mystery it is that we call God works. God takes mixed up, tired, grief-stricken, often despairing people who have a propensity to mess things up, which is to say people like us, and ever so gently calls our name and lets us turn, and turn again, and discover new life where before we'd only seen death and dead ends.

This is the great good news of the gospel, this is what we mean when we shout Christ is risen and belt out Alleluia: there is a life that cannot be squelched, that springs up where all seems lost, there is a love that cannot be bound, that will always break free, and will not rest until each and every one of us is gathered in and transformed.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024

¹ <https://www.texasobserver.org/death-penalty-god-save-texas/>