

Wandering Heart: “And I Hope”  
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 | John 21:1-19  
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By Pastor Peter Blank

Speak it aloud and it becomes a reality. Saying things out loud is important. It’s how we communicate. It’s how things are named. It’s how justice is celebrated and oppressive systems are called out. Part of the work of the Church is to name out loud the places in our world where resurrection is needed. As equally important is the work of the Church to name out loud those saints who have gone before us, those who have directed our gaze *towards* those places.

And so, on this Easter Sunday, we honor a group of women, and we name them out loud. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don’t know. Today, we honor their testimony by remembering it, celebrating it, and - most importantly - *trusting it*.

This Easter, the story of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don’t know begins with **two verbs: *come and find***. They come to the tomb, weary with weeping, weighed down by grief, but they do not allow their lamentation to distract them from the holy task at hand: anointing their teacher’s lifeless body with costly spices, spices no doubt purchased with the very money that Jesus and his disciples depended on to do the work that had ended so abruptly and violently. They come and they find. They come to the tomb and they find the stone rolled away. And not only do they find the stone rolled away but they find no body in it.

Which brings us to their next verb. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don’t know become perplexed. What had happened? Had the body been stolen? They look at each other, speechless. They feel the hair on the back of their necks stand up. The adrenaline begins to course through their veins.

Then, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don’t know are terrified. They’re terrified because two strange messengers in dazzling clothes appear out of nowhere. Were these the ones who stole the lord’s body? Were these the thieves that robbed them not only of the body of their beloved but also of the opportunity to say goodbye, to anoint him, and - for one last time - to hold the hands that had taken, blessed, broken, and given. In my imagination, in this moment of abject terror, I see Joanna throwing her body at the messengers, grasping as if to tackle them where they stand. In desperation and fear, the other women hold her back, not knowing yet what these strangers are here to do.

Then Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don’t know bow down. Not in homage or respect but in fear and anger. Fear and anger do that to you, you know. They bring you down. They weigh you down. Their fear and anger keep their gaze not upon the pink and orange sky of the early morning but upon the gray ground that they think for sure carries the body of their friend.

But then the messengers speak. They ask why they look for the living among the dead - it’s a strange question because, you know, dead things stay dead. He is not here, they say, but he is risen. And then they give the women a new verb. They implore them to cast aside their perplexing and their terror and their bowing and to try a new verb on for size: *remember*.

Remember, they say, what he said. Remember when he said that he would have to be crucified and then rise again. Remember. Because sometimes the world wants us to forget. And, so, they remember. And their remember-ing gives them two more verbs. Return and tell.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know return to the disciples. They return to the men because they have a truth that needs sharing. The last verb the women get in this passage is the most important: tell. They tell the story. They tell them that they have seen the empty tomb and the strange messengers and - no, this *isn't* some cruel cosmic joke - *he is risen*. Jesus is risen. He's not dead; he's alive!

And now that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know have had their verbs, it's time for the men to receive their one and only verb in this passage: do not believe. They don't believe the women's testimony. In fact, the text tells us that they considered the women's testimony to be "leiros." This is the one and only time that this Greek word is used in all of scripture. Now, over the centuries, English bible translators (most of them men, I would guess) have found it prudent to soften its English translation. It's usually translated as "idle talk" or "foolish chatter." Other times leiros is translated as "nonsense" or even "humbug." But all of those are tame translations. Its original meaning was much more crude. A more accurate translation in our modern vernacular is "B.S." Bull excrement! Poodoo!

The men say to the Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know, "This is B.S. Y'all are hysterical. You and your "leiros" need to pick up those spices and go anoint what we're sure is still a very dead body."

So let us be clear, friends: the first Christian sermon, which was preached by a group of women, did not receive good reviews. Instead, the first Christian sermon, preached by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know, got a *horrible* response.

And that horrible response came from a bunch of men that should've known better. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know didn't go to strangers first. They went to their friends. Their colleagues. Their family. They took their testimony to the men who literally depended on their dollars to do Christ's work, the people who knew them better than anyone else in the world, and *they* dismiss the women's testimony as a load a poodoo. And the disciple Peter is with them. Later, he will run to the empty tomb and wonder about it's emptiness.

And you and I don't have to look too far to see places in our world where the testimony of women and girls on the margins is dismissed in such vulgar ways.

- A television talk show host questioning the impeccable credentials of Supreme Court justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson.
- A former president telling teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg to "chill" because of her "anger management problem."
- Or the doctor who dismissed the pain of his patient, a woman of color named Roslyn Lewis who, like so many others like her, suffered medical malpractice because of her race.
- Or the countless numbers of women and girls - who names are too many to name out loud in this sermon - who do not get the benefit of the doubt that their abusers are so quickly afforded.

All of these injustices replicate themselves when testimony is buried or better said, entombed. But the beauty of Christ's resurrection is that it demands of those of us who dare to call ourselves Jesus followers that we unearth testimony and give it its day in court when those who have been oppressed need justice.

Most of you know that I'm the father of two young women. My twins, Sarah and Hannah are now 34 years old. There may come a day when one or both of them count on me to believe their testimony. There may come a day when they entrust me with a story that is so important that I'll have to choose between what makes sense and what is real. And if and when that moment comes, I don't want to be like the men in this passage. I don't want to live a B.S. life. I don't want to live my life so buried in cynicism that I close myself to the imperishable love of God. I don't want to live my life so wrapped up in my privilege that I don't receive the Good News of the resurrection from someone who doesn't look like me, or talk like me, or love like me, or vote like me. I don't want to live a poodoo life, a wandering faith life. I want to live a life with the transforming justice of God, a love that refuses to be buried and dismissed.

I want to live a life where I don't have to understand something to trust in it. I'm not here today to explain to you the resurrection. Even if I could, I don't know that I'd want to; it would take all the beauty out of it. I'm just here to pass along a story. I'm here this day because of the testimony of a group of women - by now you know their names - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women whose names we don't know.

Those women, they have something to say. And we have a choice to make. We can live a B.S. life and dismiss as foolishness the truth of the resurrection when it comes to us from the margins (which is where it's been all along). Or, we can learn from the foolishness of the men in today's passage, and we can respond differently. We can respond with curiosity. Curiosity of what's God's up to in the world, troubling the waters, dividing the seas that stand between our neighbors and the justice God has mothered into the world from the womb of that now gloriously and defiantly empty tomb. And I hope with a resurrection hope.

Friends, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women whose names we don't know - they were right all along:  
Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed.**

#### AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

**We may weep through the longest nights.**

**We may stare at the empty tomb with more questions than answers. We may run our fingers over the burial cloths and still long for more. But today, we are a people of hope.**

**We believe in new beginnings.**

**We believe that the God who created the world is stronger than death.**

**We believe that Jesus abides among us,  
healing, teaching, and leaving fingerprints throughout this world.**

**We believe that a tomb could not hold him.**

**We believe that the sun does rise.**

**We believe that Peter was there  
with questions, awe, and faith the size of a mustard seed.**

**We believe that the story is not over yet,  
for God is among us.**

**Today we are a people of hope.**