

**Sermon for Sunday, April 16, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

Sometimes I wonder  
what it was really like  
that very first  
Easter  
morning.

We know the story so well  
that we anticipate its conclusion,  
even take it for granted.  
But what would it have been like  
if you didn't know  
what would happen,  
if his was a death  
like any other death,  
theirs was grief  
like any other grief.

They had had far too much time to think  
the day before,  
that long Sabbath  
when the prohibition on work  
meant they couldn't even block out their grief  
by cleaning  
or gardening  
or some other sort  
of hard physical labor,  
the myriad of ways  
that we use and sometimes abuse our bodies  
to try to block out  
what is hurting our minds and our hearts.

And they could hardly seek solace  
in their faith.  
Because the one who had been their Rabbi, their teacher,  
was gone,  
and with the religious leaders

complicit  
in his murder,  
they'd be unlikely to find safety  
back at the temple.  
Even going outside was risky,  
so they stayed in their borrowed room,  
which still had traces  
of the smell of the lamb and bread  
they had eaten for dinner  
that fateful night.  
They stayed there,  
only venturing out onto the rooftop  
late in the day.

Those long hours,  
far too much silence,  
far too much grief.  
And so it was a relief  
when the sun set,  
and darkness fell, darkness  
that finally matched  
what was inside them.

Though the night was no real relief,  
tossing and turning on the hard floor  
minds constantly running with  
what ifs.  
Until dawn came,  
the first crow of the rooster,  
and they began to stir,  
and one of them lit a small fire,  
and they began to wonder where the women were.

John had seen them  
at the cross,  
faithfully standing vigil,  
and had watched them follow Joseph of Arimathea  
as he took the body to the tomb,  
and afterwards someone with him had said  
that the women had just sat there

staring at the stone  
rolled across the door.

And some boys, playing outside in the street,  
told them how on that sabbath  
they had seen soldiers heading that way,  
complaining about having  
to stand guard over a dead body,  
and surely the women hadn't still been there then?  
Perhaps they had gone, back outside to Bethany  
to stay with Lazarus and his sisters.  
But they had always been back, even when they stayed elsewhere  
for propriety's sake,  
always back  
with bread fresh from the oven,  
and whatever fruit was in season  
from the markets.

But...but maybe  
that was only for Jesus.  
Maybe  
now that he was dead  
the men would have to fend for themselves,  
their teacher gone  
and with him,  
their whole way of life.  
And they would be forced to go home,  
back north to Galilee,  
to throw themselves on the mercy of their families,  
and take up  
whatever was left  
of their old businesses.  
Nets to be mended,  
workshops to be reopened,  
failure on their faces  
for all to see.

They'd risked it all,  
and had lost everything.

There was no reason  
to stay any longer  
in Jerusalem.  
Even the women  
had abandoned them.

And so they dragged themselves up,  
rolling away their blankets  
packing their few belongings  
for the weeklong journey  
back  
to Galilee.  
And gathered a few coins together  
to go get bread,  
and it was as one of them  
stepped out the door  
that he saw a commotion,  
someone running along the street,  
ducking and weaving among the people,  
and as they came closer, he recognized her,  
Mary, the one they called Magdalene,  
and just behind her  
the other Mary,  
their skirts pulled up  
and scarves slipping,  
and everyone turning  
to stare,  
and he stepped quickly back  
holding the door open as they fell inside  
and then closing it quickly  
shutting out  
the dangerous  
curiosity.

And the words spilled out,  
unbelievable  
unintelligible  
words,  
he has been raised.  
And food forgotten

they went back upstairs  
and there the women told their story.

Of an early morning visit to the tomb,  
and an earthquake,  
and the stone fallen away  
and the soldiers  
unconscious,  
and on the stone,  
a man? a messenger? an angel?

And they stood, half-crumpled,  
to scared to move,  
to scared to stay,  
and heard a voice,  
“Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid?  
Do not be afraid?  
An unearthly being,  
soldiers half dead,  
their teacher, their rabbi,  
their Lord,  
lynched?  
Do not be afraid?

‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.’

And they looked in the gaping hole  
that was the door  
and there was no smell  
of a bloody body  
just the stony dust  
left by the rock cutters,  
and it was true,  
he wasn't there.

But what could they do?  
They knew how to mourn,

didn't want to,  
but the practices  
were age old,  
and they knew how to do it,  
but this,  
what do you do  
when the body is gone  
and he might be alive  
but... what?

And the voice again,  
“Go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

And suddenly  
they found their feet freed  
and they turned  
and ran,  
ran, tripping over their feet  
and tucking up their skirts.  
And ran  
and ran  
barely seeing where they were going,  
almost running into the man  
who stood in their way.  
“Greetings!”

And they looked up,  
and it was him.  
It was him,  
standing there in front of them,  
him,  
the one they had watched  
as he was nailed to the cross,  
and as he was pierced in his side,  
and as he said,  
“It is finished.”  
It was him  
who they saw lifted down  
and carried away

and put in the tomb,  
sealed in stone.

It was him,  
and they bent down  
to worship him,  
but he told them to get up  
to go  
and tell his disciples  
the good news.  
And as the words scrambled  
out of their mouths  
the disciples looked at one another  
and wondered  
what it was  
that they had seen,  
and if their words  
could really be trusted  
because in their culture,  
women were never allowed  
to be witnesses,  
even though  
they had been together all this time,  
and the women had never done anything except  
what would help their teacher.

But if the other gospels are right,  
the disciples didn't quite believe the two Marys,  
but had to go and see for themselves  
that empty tomb,  
and they didn't go straight away to Galilee  
but stayed round in Jerusalem,  
and perhaps it was with a sigh of exasperation  
that Jesus came to the upper room  
later that day,  
and it wasn't until some days later  
that they finally reached home  
where he had sent them.  
But not in failure and despair  
but in hope and joy.

And there Jesus  
commissioned them  
as he had commissioned  
the two Marys  
to go and tell  
the good news.

Sometimes, the way people talk about the resurrection,  
it feels more like some sort of fairy tale,  
where everything bad is wiped away  
as if it never happened,  
and goodness rules.  
Or perhaps even worse,  
a kind of joke,  
with Jesus popping up like a cartoon character,  
“I’m back!!!!!!”

But when we listen to the story carefully  
it goes much deeper than that.  
Jesus’ dying is long and painful,  
and when his body is placed in that tomb,  
he is really, truly,  
dead.  
His disciples and friends  
are grieving.  
They have lost the most important person  
in their lives.

And it is into that dark and painful place,  
that the news of the resurrection comes.  
It’s not simply  
a matter of running the movie backwards,  
and choosing a new ending.  
This is life wrung out of death,  
life that bears in its essence  
a remembrance  
of its cost.

I often think of that  
as I accompany people

as their loved ones walk that inevitable journey  
towards death,  
and sometimes  
as they themselves  
face their own death.

In some parts of the early church,  
baptism fonts  
were shaped like graves.  
They made it very clear  
that in baptism  
we are buried  
with Christ,  
there with him  
in that tomb.  
And then  
as we are lifted back out of the water  
we are lifted into resurrected life.

And that resurrected life  
is not just the life  
that we will have beyond our own deaths  
life in the nearer  
presence of God.  
It is life that we have now.  
Life that we live,  
like the disciples  
and like the two Marys.  
Life changed, given new meaning, new purpose,  
infused with the hope of Christ.

In a world suffused with darkness,  
a world groaning in pain,  
we, with Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and the disciples,  
echo that ancient cry:  
Alleluia. Christ is risen.  
He is risen indeed. Alleluia.