When Empty Means Full

John 20:1-18 Kimby Young

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The tomb was empty. Jesus was not there. Jesus’ body was gone. The first reaction was confusion – utter confusion. This was not supposed to happen. In the other gospels it records that an angel was there at the tomb when the women first visited – an angel saying “don’t be afraid,” an angel telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead. But in John – in the story we heard this morning, quite a bit of time passes before they were told what had happened. Time for Mary to run back to the disciples, time for two disciples to run to the tomb and look around, time for the disciples to leave – still wondering what was going on, time for Mary to stand alone in the garden weeping, time to peer into the empty tomb and be confused. All that time, and they didn’t know what was happening. All that time and Mary had to imagine, or guess, or worry, or cry absorbed in loss. Her beloved Jesus was gone. How could she ever imagine this was good news?

We come to Easter from this side of the good news. We come knowing all our lives that Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus conquered the grave, Jesus defeated sin and Jesus won freedom for us and for all who would believe. We know what happened. So we approach Easter with joy and celebration. We know what it means that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, that Jesus Christ has saved us, that new life is possible, that resurrection is promised for all who believe. We know and we rejoice.

But Mary… Mary didn’t understand. No wonder she was crying. No wonder her mind was going through all the possibilities – or at least all the realistic possibilities. Maybe somebody moved the body, maybe the guards or the gardener – took him. Why would they do that? Can you tell me the place where you took him?

And then… “Mary” … with one word understanding flooded into her soul. Jesus called her by name. “Mary.” And suddenly everything turned upside down. Everything was right and good. Jesus was alive. Jesus was standing right before her. Jesus conquered death. Jesus rose from the grave. Jesus was calling her again. Imagine. What did this mean?

Well, we know. It means God can do anything. It means God has done everything to show us great love. It means Jesus is with us, God is with us, forever. It means anything is possible because of this great love of God. It means everything is new in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today we celebrate the day that God changed everything. Today we celebrate transformation. We celebrate that God can turn empty to full, darkness to light, sorrow to joy, pain to healing, fear to courage, sin to reconciliation, lost to found, death to life eternal. We celebrate that God has the power to make all things new, and that God has the love to touch us with that power of newness. We celebrate that because of that power and love of God our lives can be made new. Emptiness can be filled; mistakes can be wiped away; relationships can be restored. This is the grace of God. Life has purpose and possibility because God loves us and wants great fulfillment for us. God wants us to know this love and to share this love with others. The resurrection of Jesus shows us just how far God can and will go to make things right. Anything is possible. Everything is possible because Jesus lives!

So back to Mary, back to the scripture for today. Mary stands in a garden graveyard. One moment she has lost everything. The next moment God has not only restored what was lost, God has transformed the world. One moment of unbearable sorrow becomes a lifetime of unending joy, and beyond a lifetime the promise of paradise for all eternity. Mary didn’t see this coming. When she was standing alone, crying in the garden, staring at an empty tomb, she could not imagine what God had in store for her. She could not imagine a future with hope. And yet God had already worked that miracle of transformation, she just didn’t know it.

Here’s another lesson for us today. If you find yourself staring into emptiness – remember Jesus lives. If you find yourself alone or afraid – remember Jesus lives. If you don’t know what to do with your life, or you don’t even know what to do next – remember Jesus lives. Anything is possible because God loves you. Remember Jesus lives!

In a few minutes we will share an ancient practice called “flowering the cross.” Churches all over the world today will do the same. Google it later to see the images. It is a ritual of transformation. You are invited to act out this gift of God’s grace. Right now this cross stands empty. You will be invited to come forward and add a flower to this cross – a symbol of life and beauty. As you do, remember a loved one who has passed, or any grief that you carry. Place this grief on the cross with your flower – symbolically give it to Jesus. And with that ritual remember that God transforms death to life. Remember that those whom we have lost are already in heaven with God – enjoying the greatest Easter celebration we can imagine, or even greater than we can imagine. Remember them and give thanks for them and give thanks that they are already with God. And remember God’s promise that because of Jesus Christ you will someday join them in paradise – celebrating and living within the greatest love of all time.

God can transform anything, my friends. God can take anything in your life and make it better. As you watch the cross up here transform into beauty and life and hope and promise, offer your grief to God. Like Mary Magdalene crying in the garden, hear your name and know that you are loved. Receive God’s gift of grace and goodness and be transformed. God can do anything – everything. Jesus Christ rose from the dead and turned emptiness into the fullness of God’s love.

Hallelujah! Praise God, Jesus Christ is risen today and for all time.

And all God’s people say Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Amen.