

## Finding Hope

John 20:1-18 by Patty Friesen Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark. Mary and Peter and John are very much in the chaos of their grief and fear. They go to the tomb to mourn Jesus' death and to care for his dead body. They do not expect anything else. Blinded and confused by the empty tomb, Peter and John run off and go home while Mary lingers, grieving at the tomb. here is no quick or confident resolution to her sorrow.

Mary's lingering and grieving over the loss of her teacher and friend—and surely also her uncertainty about her future—is met by the presence of Christ. However, she doesn't recognize him at first. But then Jesus calls her by name: "Mary!" And she knows him right away. Christ's invitation to new life is almost always unfamiliar and surprising, even disconcerting. We may overlook or miss Christ among us altogether.

When Mary recognizes Jesus, she is so excited that she wants to grab him and dance for joy. But Jesus says to her, "Don't hold on to me, Mary." Later, Jesus will say the opposite to Thomas—inviting Thomas to touch his wounds. But Mary's response of grasping onto her former relationship with Jesus, is different from Thomas's touch out of doubt and skepticism. "Holding on" or clasping to Jesus and dancing with him isn't the same as following him. As much as Mary Magdalene loves him, as faithful and passionate as she is, he says to her "Let go."

Sometimes we may hold onto a past image too tightly instead of letting Jesus lead the way or challenge us in a new reality. Jesus becomes a source of safety and

certainty instead of lighting a way ahead of us and inviting us to take risks for the kingdom of God. Perhaps, we need to hear Jesus say, I call you ahead—through death - to my resurrection, to a new reality.

These past weeks of Lent we've been discerning our future path as a church with pastoral leadership interviews and discussing a possible lease to a day care. Believe me, we are all fearful for those changes - while at the same time hungering for hope for a sustainable future for our church building and community. We are so lucky to have young people in our church and their parents in leadership. We've been riding on the shirttails of this commitment of the next generations without worrying too much about when those youth grow up and leave church and no other young families come to church. I think I've holding onto that image of the past commitment of the next generations and been in personal denial of the tenuousness of our future, even as other rural and urban Mennonite churches close around us.

In our North American society, Christianity is now in the declining minority and within that Anabaptists are declining as a minority within a minority. Tim Alberta in *The Kingdom, The Power and The Glory* says that people used to reject Christianity because it was too self-righteous but now they reject it because it's too hostile to other minority groups and too aggressive in controlling politics. (p. 126). Alberta is speaking to Americans particularly, whew not Canadians, saying, Humility doesn't come easy to the American Christian. The self-importance that accompanies citizenship in the world's mightiest nation is trouble enough, never mind when its augmented by the certainty of exclusive membership in the afterlife. With Christians as a minority in North American, the question shouldn't be how best to fight back and reclaim our lost status in society.

Rather, the question should be how Christians might lose well and die well - carrying ourselves in humble ways that find hope and confidence and great love in the gospel even in the midst of uncertainty.

The next generation of would-be believers is watching us. They want to know if we love Jesus first, more than money, more than social status, more than a political party, more than a country. If we want to be like Jesus, we have to start by showing grace to those who don't deserve it, by showing kindness to others, by seeing in everyone, especially our enemies, the image and likeness of God. None of this can be accomplished with a mentality of fear and grabbing to hold onto security of what we have always known, like Mary Magdalene. (p. 133) Only by letting go of what we've always known, can we trust Jesus enough to lead us forward.

In the words of spirituality writer, Wendy Wright, of all the mysteries our faith invites us to contemplate, the Resurrection is by far the most astonishing. Not simply in the sense of being difficult to believe in a logical fashion. That, in a way, is the very point of it. The very idea of resurrection shatters all the categories of comprehension with which we make sense of our world. It draws us instead into a reality that transcends present possibility. For myself, the wonder of the Resurrection is not so much discovered in my shoulder shrugging acknowledgement of the power of God to affect the impossible. It is discovered instead in our own capability, pried open by the sight of the empty tomb, to live into our most poignant longings, to dream our farthest dreams, and to hope with the full expansion of our hearts. We are met at the gates of death with a freshness and fullness of life barely grasped by the wildest hopes of our imaginings. We find the courage to trust and release.

Our peering into the empty tomb forever changes us. How inexhaustibly rich the Easter event is. What astonishing proclamations we sing. Where O Death is your victory - where O Death is your sting? For a day we live liturgically into God's reign of impossible justice and peace. Mercy overflows. Death wounds are healed. We are called by name. Easter is not merely an event of long ago. Nor is it simply our finding hope. Easter is also realized when we are most fully alive and aware of all that is every day. "If we only knew the truth of it, we would know that each day is Easter."

Thankfully, for the church, Easter is not one day of eggs and bunnies. We have a whole Easter season in which to continue to relish and meditate on the meaning of resurrection. We had 40 days of Lent but now we get 50 days of Easter until Pentecost on May 19. In this way the church is countercultural - refusing to celebrate and move on. We will celebrate and linger and meditate and integrate for the next 50 days even as we continue in congregational and personal discernment for our future. We have 50 days to dwell in the wild hope of resurrection, even in the midst of an uncertain future. The tomb is empty. Death is conquered. Christ is risen - he is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!