

EASTER SUNDAY | a sermon by Pastor Clare Gromoll

** "In the Meanwhile, Will We Rise Up?"

focal text: John 20:1-18

Friends, old and new, each of us sourced by the fathomless Love that is God, please pray with me.

Incarnate God of resurrection, as we seek to follow Jesus, surrendering to your gravitational pull of your love, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen. Mary of Magdala was among Jesus' closest friends. They were attached at the hip, so to speak. Through the highs and lows of any friendship worth its weight in laughter and tears, Mary had learned with Jesus how to speak truth boldly, how to embody compassion in courageous ways, how to embrace the risks inherent in vulnerability and trust. And even as Jesus was so very authentic with Mary, he was also that one person whom she most admired – the one whose wisdom and kindness she most wanted to emulate, the one whose deep insights and bold stances would continue to inform the ways she would live out the rest of her days. Jesus was her favorite person. And now he was gone from this world. He had been taken from her. Each of us can relate to having lost the living, breathing presence of one our more favorite people. That kind of loss can feel immeasurably vast.

Early that Sunday morning, after the Sabbath day of rest, Mary of Magdala visited Jesus' tomb – not once, but twice. She first made her way to his tomb in the darkness of early morning. She likely hoped to spend quiet moments in the intimate circle linking together the tomb that held Jesus' body for her, her own shattered-hearted grief, the quiet beauty of dawn, and the palpable presence of the Love of God. But there would not be rest for her weary soul at that first visit. Instead, as we have all experienced in our own lives, a fresh wave of searing pain rolled over her as she quickly attempted to make sense of the stone having been rolled away from her rabbi's tomb. Somehow, incredibly, things had just gotten worse! Rudely shoved into fight or flight mode, Mary ran to share her discovery with others of Jesus' closest friends.

It was later in the morning, when her heartbeat had slowed once again and she had caught her breath – sort of, though likely with the pit in her stomach hardly changed at all – it was then that she returned to the tomb to be present with her grief at a slowed pace. We heard Cheri read moments ago,

“Meanwhile, Mary stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept, she stooped to peer inside.”

What strength of heart it took for Mary to return to the tomb, to weep, and to stoop to peer inside – inside the tomb and inside her grief. Today I am asking us each to wonder, “In the meanwhile, will we rise up?”

As I prepared to speak with you on this Easter morning of 2022, two years into the coronavirus pandemic including the many ways humans have sought to care for one another throughout this ordeal, nearly two months into the unprovoked war and genocide in Ukraine, and amidst the many ongoing ugly injustices and gentle mercies in our own public and private lives, I've wondered what we need to sustain us in our faith journeys – particularly at times when the boundless love of resurrection seems to elude us.

I was reminded of a favorite anthem, made popular by vocalist Josh Groban in 2004, entitled, “You Raise Me Up.” In 2002, the song was created by an Irish-Norwegian duo known as Secret Garden. Composer Rolf Lovland first played it at his own mother's funeral. Eventually, it topped billboard charts in the US and UK. When asked what raises him up, Groban has stated that God raises him up. When asked that question, composer Lovland has stated that everyone can raise one another up. I wonder if those responses are possibly one and the same.

I invite you to close your eyes if comfortable doing so. I'll read aloud the core lyrics of "You Raise Me Up." I invite you to welcome the words to touch you in a place of grief, loss, exhaustion, or all three in your own life.

"When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary
When troubles come and my heart burdened be
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence
Until You come and sit awhile with me.
You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders
You raise me up to more than I can be"

Friends, through whom has the strong love of God raised you up in the past?
Whom do you long to raise up by accompanying them in the midst of their struggles now?
In the meanwhile, will you welcome your own exhausted, holy weeping?

As we seek out, stretch toward, and lean into the light of God's love, known in the risen Christ, I'm also reminded of an anonymous and brilliant debunking of the cliched phrase, "God won't give you more than you can handle." I've shared before that I've seen a radically empowering rewrite that crosses out "won't give you more than you can handle," and substitutes in new wording, asserting that "God will walk with you through the unthinkable. You were never meant to 'handle' it alone." Seeking, stretching, and leaning in to trust the love of God embodied through the people with whom we cross paths, day in and day out, will raise us up.

Mary needed Jesus to appear to her in the unexpected, gentle way of a gardener. That renewing moment of connection with the depth of God's love that she had known in Jesus would empower her to rise up again.

Today, we continue to experience hope as we encounter Jesus, the living Christ, in our daily lives. When have you recently encountered boundless, selfless, hopeful resurrection love? Who has shown you a glimmer of Jesus' way of radically inclusive, forgiving, encouraging love? The love of Christ that Jesus embodied is God's best possibility for creative renewal of hope in our lives – for resurrection from the death of hope. Our role in the work of resurrection is that of opening ourselves to God's best possibility for each moment of our lives. This is present-day resurrection – that Christ rises within us and among us, bringing new possibilities into our lives even in the midst of pain and loss.

Perhaps what matters most about resurrection is that we realize our active role in it. In order for Christ to resurrect hope in our lives, we need to affirm and celebrate the possibility and truth inherent in resurrection love.

When you have lost a relationship that cannot be replaced, may you allow Christ to rise through the affirmation of a new friend who reaches out to you – even as you hold space in your heart for the one you miss.

When a treatment option has failed for a friend or family member and that person still shows up to the struggles of life today, reach out to affirm Christ rising in that person – even as you grieve wholeheartedly with them.

When you feel most alone, let Christ rise up through you as sacred vulnerability – encouraging you to reach out toward others and allowing your heart to be touched by others reaching out to you.

When someone you love lives one more day in sobriety, recognize and affirm resurrection in that person. When they relapse, remind them that they have risen before.

It will do no good for us to believe that Christ is risen unless we live its truth. In the meanwhile, may we be radically open to resurrection love rising up in and through us. Love is counting on us. Amen.