

Bearers of hope
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18
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Ah it's Easter. Alleluia! We are here in the glorious place of worship and the church is magnificent with these lilies against the backdrop of the dossal – that large piece of fabric that hangs behind the altar. This fabric is called “Coronation” and it is especially used for celebratory occasions such as Easter, baptisms and weddings. Now you might have noticed that this dossal was up all through Lent in a season that is not celebratory at all. I left it up because last year when the pandemic hit, we had the purple dossal from Lent for Easter because we were all in lockdown and there was no one to change it. That purple dossal stayed up for months and months. It was as if Lent never ended. We finally changed it for Christmas and when we came back around to Lent and we were still in pandemic mode, I left it up because I wanted those brilliant and beautiful colors in that tapestry to give people the glimpse of hope in what is still a difficult time.

Easter brings hope. It is a theme you have been hearing a lot from me lately – in my Easter letter and in recent sermons. I find it very important in these times to be intentional in looking for hope because the world arounds us tends to do the opposite. Week before last I saw an article in the NY Times called, Bad News Bias¹. Bruce Sacerdote, an economics professor at Dartmouth College, noticed that the Covid-19 television coverage almost always seemed negative, regardless of what was he seeing in the data or hearing from scientists he knew. When Covid cases were rising in the U.S., the news coverage emphasized the increase. When cases were falling, the coverage instead focused on those places where cases were rising. And when vaccine research began showing positive results, the coverage downplayed it.

Turns out he was right. He and 2 other researchers built a database of Covid coverage from every major network, both liberal and conservative. They found that about 87 percent of Covid coverage in national U.S. media last year was negative. The share was 51 percent in international media, 53 percent in U.S. regional media and 64 percent in scientific journals. Why is this the case? Well bad news sells. Our culture seeks out bad news – stories of despair. We share it. We post it. We pay more attention to it.

Into this atmosphere we Christians are called to come bearing hope. We can bear hope because we have been given hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “The Christian faith is, at its foundation, one of hope, because even in the midst of all that is wrong with us, and wrong with our world, God not only comes to us in Jesus; he makes a new way for us through all the sorrow and death we experience and inflict on one another.”² And yet we get worn down. We hear the news. We live in this world. We face illness and tragedy. Mass shootings abound. Covid infections are increasing in NJ with more young people being hospitalized. People are still starving, suffering from other diseases, and living in violence.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/briefing/boulder-shooting-george-segal-astrazeneca.html?smid=em-share>

² Bishop Mariann Budde, <https://www.edow.org/about/bishop-mariann/writings/2021/04/01/easter-2021>

Even so, we place our trust in Jesus and know that hope is there. Sometimes it begins with a tiny speck that we can barely see and then grows and grows until we find ourselves overflowing with hope. Sometimes we start out hoping for one thing and find that God gives us something even better - something we could barely imagine. The story of Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb that first Easter morning in the gospel of John is one of these. The story starts with barely a speck of hope and turns in one where hope abounds.

I wonder how much hope Mary Magdalene had when she got up that morning to go to Jesus' tomb. Surely she was struggling with immense grief and the horror of Jesus' crucifixion. Did she even remember Jesus' words about rising again on the third day? Did she even know that today was the third day? Her hope may have only been to find some consolation in visiting Jesus' tomb.

When she gets to the tomb and finds his body gone, she panics. No room for hope at this moment. She runs to get Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved to tell them what has happened. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." They come, check out the situation and leave.

Mary is left weeping outside the tomb. She looks into the tomb and sees two angels. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope now. Maybe these people know where Jesus' body is. They ask her why she is weeping? Then she turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn't recognize him. Jesus too asks why she is weeping. Thinking he is the gardener she asks if he knows where Jesus' body is. Then Jesus calls her name - Mary - and she recognizes him. Teacher - she cries out and now hope begins to dawn. The glimpse of recognition grows into the realization that Jesus is in front of her. She declares - I have seen the Lord. She carries that message of hope back to the disciples and with them too hope begins to grow. In turn, they proclaimed the hope of resurrection and that message has been borne over 2000 years to us.

We Christians are a people of hope. That means we seek hope even when there is no sign of it. We set out as Mary did not even knowing exactly what we are hoping for, but we know it is there, because we know God is always there. We find hope with our fellow Christians just as Mary went to get Peter and the other disciple when she finds the empty tomb. Their arriving and then leaving does not bring the hope then, but it is part of the process. Mary weeps - she cries out and angels and Jesus himself responds. It is then that she encounters the risen Christ and hope abounds.

I want to share a story where hope showed up. It is a very ordinary story compared to Mary encountering the risen Christ, but remembering that hope shows up in ordinary times as well is important. Saturday before last as part of the vestry retreat, the vestry met with Canon Brian Jemmott from the diocese to for a brief orientation to the process of finding a new priest for St. Peter's. After the hour session with him, we were all a bit overwhelmed. There were many steps to the process including a readiness assessment. Afterwards, the energy in the Zoom room was low. I asked the vestry if

they wanted to continue with what had been planned for the rest of the retreat or whether they wanted to take a look at the some of the steps that Canon Jemmot had identified. They chose the latter and after prayer, they started brainstorming ideas in the readiness assessment areas – spiritual, emotional, financial and physical. We started slowly, but then before we knew it, ideas were flying, the energy was up and hope has blossomed all around. The vestry like Mary were willing to set out and see what was possible, they did it together and they called on God in prayer.

We have the Good news. We know Jesus rises from the dead. We know God comes to us in Jesus. We know he makes a new way for us through all the sorrow and death we experience and inflict on one another. This is the source of our hope. My friends, each and every day seek hope, share hope and bear hope out into this world.