

Ordinary Grace
Easter Sunday 2024
John 20:1-18

He is risen!

Good Morning Family,

It's Easter Sunday; my most favourite Sunday of the year. We are here together to remember the miracle. To feel and to know in our deepest selves that Jesus is risen, death is defeated, and all things, ourselves, creation, all things now live in the light of redemption, of hope, of possibility-of resurrection. It is a day of lavish grace and unending love. Thanks be to God!

Our scripture, which Carrol read for us this morning, comes from the gospel of John. The passage begins with these words, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." The day has not yet begun in earnest. Perhaps, in her grief, Mary tossed and turned all night long. Unable to sleep, dozing off only to be jolted awake by the painful memory, her Jesus was gone. She throws off her cover, rises from her cot and looks out at the darkness. It'll be morning soon enough, she thinks, I'll go to his tomb. Perhaps she brings some spices, something to place outside this miserable rock where her master's body is. She arrives in the dark, maybe

just the first ribbon of dawn coming up in the east. As she gets closer to the tomb, she can see that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance, the dark hollow doorway fills her with fear. What has happened? She can't face it alone. She runs back into the city and pounds on the door of the home where Simon Peter and John are staying; they appear almost instantly, their own eyes rimmed with grief and insomnia. Mary, breathless, declares, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

The three of them run to the tomb. Mary falls back, a stitch in her side, John eclipses Peter and arrives at the tomb first. He looks in the door of the tomb, and sees the linen that Jesus' body was wrapped in, lying there. He can't go into...dread fills him, what else might he find? But Peter, of course, wild, impetuous Peter catches up and walks straight into the tomb. He sees the linens, the cloth that Jesus's head had been laid on, lying in another spot. The death clothes, neatly arranged. John realizes it first; he's gone. Jesus is not there anymore. Peter knows it too. The body stolen? The remains desecrated? The scripture tells us that they didn't get it. Resurrection didn't occur to them. They leave, leave Mary alone, perhaps angry at another thing gone wrong, another grief, another problem. Another thing that didn't go how it was supposed to.

But Mary stays. Weeping. Where else is she supposed to go? This was her beloved Jesus; she would have done anything for him. She can't leave this tomb; the last place she saw his body. She peers inside the tomb, trying to see the terrible proof that will turn her back to her home, back to her sleepless cot. It's light now, and through her tears

she sees to angels, robed in white, sitting where Jesus head and feet had lain.

“Woman,” one asks her, “why are you weeping?” Who were the men in the tomb, was the lack of sleep, her swallowed eyes making her see things. She responds, “They’ve taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have put him.” She turns away from the men in the tomb, and sees Jesus there, he’s bent low, pulling weeds, tending the space around the tomb. She mistakes him for a gardener, maybe this man will know, perhaps he saw what happened to her Jesus. “Woman, he asks, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?” Another sob breaks in Mary’s chest. Why is she here alone? Why does she have to face this death alone? The gardener, who is really Jesus, says, “Mary.” And she knows. She’s heard this voice a thousand, hears the love, the familiarity with which she heard call her by name so many times, and SHE KNOWS. “Teacher!!!” She shouts and throws herself into his arms. JESUS IS ALIVE. He tells her, “Don’t hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Then he asks her to go her brothers, the ones who walked away before the miracle, and tell them, ‘I am ascending to your father and my father, to your God and my God.’” Mary Magdalene, the first one charged with declaring the resurrection, runs back to the home of the disciples, face alight, tears streaming, dust and sweat clinging to her, and she bursts into the room and yells, “I have seen the Lord!!!” Jesus is RISEN. Every Easter, it gets me. “I have seen the Lord!”

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is the defining miracle of Christianity; it is the truth on which we hang all our hopes. The biggest miracle came, and death has been defeated. Ephesians 1:18-23 says, “ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order

that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” Further, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the reason we can have hope in this life as well as in the life to come. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 says, “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Last week, I read this lovely novel, *Ordinary Grace*, by William Kent Krueger. Set in the 1960s, the book tells the story of Frank Drum, the 13 year old son of a minister in Minnesota. The summer is a grim one, in which death visited frequently and assumed many forms. When tragedy befalls his own family, Frank hopes for the big miracle, and

great reversal. And it does not come, rather, Frank is visited by ordinary grace. The goodness of God that comes in a million small, unassuming ways that allows him to carry on when the world is falling apart. Today is Easter; the day that as humanity received the big miracle, Jesus, risen from the dead. And in our lives the big miracle is always on the one we hope for, and sometimes it comes, yet more often, we receive, instead, ordinary grace. The small miracles that point us to the truth of the Risen Jesus.

That's what I'd like us to spend the rest of our time this morning talking about-extraordinary, ordinary grace that surrounds us every day, the little miracles that build us up as a Church, as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Just as in our story, ordinary grace comes in the dark, it begins in the unseen. It shows up in the shadows, in the hard things, in the spaces that we would rather not go. I remember when I was in high school, there was a massive flood in my hometown. It rained over a foot, and the river which runs through Roseau, four blocks from my house, spilled its banks. The main floor of home was unlivable, it was, frankly a terrible summer. Looking back, I'm not sure how my parents got through it. I can see all the cracks and fissures in their mental health now. We bounced back and forth to various homes of family and friends for the first few weeks following the flood, before we received temporary housing. We spent one week staying at one of my Dad's coworkers homes out in the country while they were away on vacation. They had a big farmhouse. We all felt so terribly low. I was sleeping in the bedroom of one of their sons, on the second floor. It had been a sweltering June day, so all the windows were open that night

to let the cooler air come in. I was laying in that strange bed, looking out on the pitch dark farmyard, and there in the yard, Fireflies. Probably 75 of them. They're not common in Minnesota, you might see one or two on the lake at night. But there they were, hovering around the yard, miniscule lamps, blinking lanterns, snatches of light in the pitch black. I took such comfort in that; my family was not alone in the dark, there was light there too. Ordinary grace in the friends and family who offered us beds and couches to sleep on, ordinary grace in the contractor who agreed to fix our ravaged home, ordinary grace in the co-workers who took up a collection for our family. If it weren't for the dark, you couldn't see the fireflies.

Just as in our story, everyday miracles stun us with their ordinary-ness. In our scripture for this morning, Ordinary Grace is all over the big miracle. Mary knew that Jesus was alive through the most mundane, human, embodied ways. The tears from a broken heart. A man kneeling in a garden, tending a place. The voice of her beloved teacher calling her by name. The embrace that makes everything feel okay again. The dry throat that cries out through tears, "I have seen the Lord!" All the ordinary miracles that point to the miraculous truth- we are not alone. God loves us. God came back for us. All things are going to be made new.

Further the Ordinary Graces in this life underscore the deepest, most abiding truth there is- that God loves us. When I was thinking about the fact that this would be my last official sermon as pastor here, I thought, what is the one thing I want to make sure I say, what do I want to be the words I leave this congregation with, and this is it: We are

loved by God. Fully, completely, deeply loved by God. It is the love that is offered in Jesus Christ that calls us to him, equips us for life together, and can carry us through whatever uncertainty we may face: GOD. LOVE. US. God is with us and for us.

Clarence Jordan, the co-founder of Koinonia Farm, wrote, “The resurrection of Jesus was simply God’s unwillingness to take our “no” for an answer. He raised Jesus, not as an invitation to us to come to heaven when we die, but as a declaration that he himself has now established permanent, eternal residence here on earth. He is standing beside us, strengthening us in this life. The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is not that we shall die and go home to be with him, but that he has risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick prisoner brothers with him.”

And Friends, if it is true that Jesus’ love is revealed to this world through Ordinary Grace, then we get to be the bringers of that Grace. We get to the way that Jesus shows that love to this world, to friend and stranger, neighbor and enemy. We can offer that love through everyday deeds. No act is too small, when offered in the name of Jesus.

I’d like to close this morning with words of truth on this calling from my forever favourite, Rachel Held Evans.

“Sunday morning sneaks up on us-like dawn, like resurrection, like the sun that rises a ribbon at time. We expect trumpet and triumphant entry, but as always, God surprises

us by showing up in ordinary things: in bread, in wine, in water, in words, in sickness, in healing, in death, in a manger of hay, in a mothers womb, in an empty tomb. Church isn't some community you join or some place you arrive. Church is what happens when someone taps you on the shoulder and whispers in your ear, Pay attention, this is holy ground; God is here. Even here, in the dark, God is busy making all things new.

So show up. Open every door. At the risk of looking like a fool buried with his feet facing the East or like a mockingbird singing stubbornly at night, anticipate resurrection. It's either just around the bend or a million miles away. Or perhaps it's somewhere in between. Let's find out, (both here and at Mount Royal) together. “

Amen.