

Beyond Rescue

John 20: 1-18

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Cemeteries are good places to cry. Mary knew that. She had been crying silently all night, holding back sobs and moans so as not to disturb the others in the small house, crying until what passed for a pillow was wet through, crying until the tears ran down and made puddles in her ears. Cemeteries are good places to cry. So when it got to the point that she thought she would die if she couldn't let it all out, she got up and made her way through the silent streets to the garden tomb where they had left the body.

You see, nothing had turned out the way she expected. Up to the very end, she just knew that somehow Jesus would be rescued. Surely God would not let him die! And to die like that, naked and exposed with spit running down.... She couldn't bear it. Somehow, someone would come to rescue him. There would be last minute reprieve, and they could all breathe a sigh of relief and go back to Galilee and be happy. But it didn't happen. She stood there and watched as he writhed and moaned and then she started to pray that he would die fast. And then it was over.

Cemeteries are good places to cry. So on that deadly silent morning, she came through the dark streets to get as close to what was left of him as she could and all she wanted was a little privacy. But again, nothing turned out the way she expected.

The first thing she got was a nasty surprise: the tomb was empty and the body was gone.

It's hard to see with tears in your eyes. And Mary's eyes are so full of tears, her grief so intense that even when a couple of angels show up and start a conversation she turns away from them and keeps on searching frantically for the missing body. And then we hear the pitiful cry: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." The desolation of the abandoned one: He's gone. He's gone. And I don't know where he is. I don't know where to find him.

It's hard to see with tears in your eyes. Even when Jesus himself speaks to her, she does not know him. She wants that body; it's all she has left in the world. And she's not going to stop until she gets it. She is determined that Jesus is going to be rescued, even after he is dead.

How human and how natural is the desire to rescue and be rescued. When we face trouble or sickness or death either in ourselves or in someone we care about, what we yearn for is rescue: we want the doctor or the counselor or God or somebody to fix it, to cure it, to give us back what we had, to make things the way they used to be. And when they can't or don't fix it, when the cavalry doesn't come riding over the hill, that's it. Our hopes and dreams die, and we lay the bodies in the tomb and roll a stone across the door and that's the end of the story. There has been no rescue.

But if Mary learned anything that day at the cemetery, it was that there is something that comes into play when there is no rescue. She learned about something beyond rescuing and being rescued. And what she learned about rescue was resurrection.

Resurrection is very different from rescue. Rescue means being freed from

struggle, being saved from pain. Rescue means that we get back what we had as we had it. But resurrection means that we find new life on the other side of the struggle or even in the midst of pain. Resurrection means that the story is not over when the stone is rolled across the mouth of the tomb. Resurrection means that even though we have to pass through the valley of the shadow of sickness or feebleness or grief or divorce or abandonment or even death itself, that is not all there is. God gives a new kind of life, a life that is still worth living, a new kind of aliveness toward God and the world even while the tears are still puddling in our ears.

Resurrection means that there is life on the other side, even if the rescue never comes.

This is what we are gathered here today to celebrate. This is the reason for the lilies and the trumpets. This is what we remember as we break the bread and pour the cup: He was not rescued. He died and was buried.

And then on the third day, he rose again from the dead. And life has never been the same since.

So, turn around, Mary! Quit looking for a corpse to enshrine. Turn around, Mary! Let go of the past and face the future with hope. Turn around, Mary, and wipe your eyes. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And because he lives, we too shall LIVE. Thanks be to God!