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1 Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18

## MISSING

“While it was still dark....” That’s the description of the situation on that Sunday when a distraught woman named Mary from the Galilean town of Magdala went to the tomb where Jesus’ corpse had been laid. The Gospel of John uses imagery of light and darkness to speak of more than just physical conditions. “While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...” She had been one of just five of Jesus’ family and followers who were witnesses to his death on the cross on Friday. The other disciples and followers also dealt with their experiences of darkness that came with the frightening and devastating execution of their beloved leader. Mary had watched as he was dying, unable to catch his breath. In crucifixion, the body is situated on the cross in such a way that it makes it difficult and eventually impossible to breathe. It had to be so hard to see someone die in such a way! This past week, in a trial in Minneapolis, we’ve heard the emotion-laden testimony of those who witnessed the asphyxiation of George Floyd. Part of the pain these witnesses described was tied up with their sense of powerlessness to stop something so dreadful that was happening right before them.

Jesus had died on Friday afternoon. There were two of Jesus’ followers who were involved in his hurried entombment, which had to be done before the start of the Sabbath at sundown. One was named Joseph and the other was Nicodemus. The latter was the one who came to Jesus by night, to whom Jesus had said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Hurriedly, those two men wrapped Jesus’ body with myrrh and aloes in linen burial cloths and placed it in a tomb located in a garden nearby.

The darkness that marked the beginning of the Sabbath Friday evening must have continued for Mary throughout Saturday when Sabbath limits kept her from going

to the tomb to mourn her great loss. Many of us have experienced our own delays in grieving for loved ones in this past year. But part of what made things seem dark for Mary was not only the death of the one she had admired and followed and loved, but also the sense that all that he had stood for and taught had been squashed. Jesus had stood against those who figuratively had a knee on the neck of the people, those who used their power in oppressive, death-dealing ways, those who didn't care about what was fair, just, and right, those who acted as if God didn't so love the world and all of its people. All that was good, all that gave reason for faith and hope seemingly had been put to death along with Jesus.

Then even more was added to Mary's distressingly dark experience. As she got to the tomb, she found that the stone had been removed from the opening, and Jesus' body was missing. How could it have gotten any worse than it already was?! And yet, now, in Mary's understanding, those who had done Jesus and all of them so wrong had now even stolen her opportunity to grieve her great loss. She ran to tell Peter and another disciple of the treachery, that Jesus' body had been taken. There was no other reasonable way to explain the situation. The two disciples ran to the tomb and found it as Mary had said. The linen grave cloths were there, but the body was missing. The tomb was empty.

Emptiness can be experienced differently. There's an empty calendar when you have way too much to do and you're ready for a break from a busy schedule, and there's empty when you have nothing to look forward to and the days just stretch on into what seems like nothingness. There's an empty stomach when you are struggling to wait for Easter dinner and there's an empty feeling when you're lacking the ability to provide food for your family. There is an empty room when you know someone you love is on their way home, and there is a whole different kind of empty when you know they are not. For Mary, the tomb's emptiness meant not only that Jesus' body was missing. It felt like God was missing as well.

Suddenly, Mary is not alone in her grief. As she is weeping, she looks once again into the tomb. There are a couple of angels there that she doesn't recognize as such. They ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary might well have responded, "Why are you not? Aren't you aware of what is going on? There is so much death

and division and destruction and we have no power to challenge those who hold the reins. When all hope is missing, what can one do but weep? They have taken away my Lord...”

Mary then turns away from the tomb and notices someone else there. He asks her the same question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and then adds, “Whom are you looking for?” With her tear-filled eyes and grief-filled heart she doesn’t recognize who is before her. Thinking him to be the gardener, she asks if he knows where her Lord might be. Then the one who is standing there, her risen Lord Jesus, says to her, “Mary.”

Upon hearing Jesus say her name, her experience of deep darkness was suddenly transformed. Standing before her was the one who had inspired his followers to imagine a different world, one where the majestic love of God embraces the excluded; a world where the myth of scarcity is shown to be false by a five thousand plate banquet served from the contents of a child’s lunchbox resulting in more leftovers than all the available Tupperware could contain; a world where instead of being based on survival of the fittest, wolves and lambs could picnic together; a world where deep guilt and blame could be wiped away and new purpose and meaning could be the harbinger of eternal life. This was the world that God was loving into becoming. While it had still been dark, God’s initiatives were showing that as powerful as death was, it didn’t have the last word. The One who had been taken away from Mary and from the world was no longer missing.

Mary’s inclination was to grab onto her Lord and never let him go. But instead, Jesus blessed this one who had witnessed and experienced so much pain, allowing her to be the first witness of the resurrection. This kind of great transformational news had to be shared and Jesus sends a woman, this woman, Mary, empowering her as the first apostle of a resurrected gospel. So recently weeping, Mary was now witnessing, telling those who didn’t know what to believe, “I have seen the Lord!”

What Mary experienced and saw and heard and expressed comes to us this day. In your experiences of loss and pain, there may have been dark times when you felt like God was missing. But our risen Lord calls each one of us by name, sending us

forth with the great transformational news that God so loved the world, that God could in no way disengage from it, that God didn't let the forces of hatred, inhumanity, and death win out. Instead, our risen Lord stands before you and me, calling each of us by name, saying the great resurrection news is for us as well. This is life-giving, hope-giving, faith-giving power that becomes more powerful still in its sharing through word and deed. May we in this world of great need, not turn out to be among those who are missing. The One who God sent to the world to show God's love and the gift of eternal life is the One who calls each of us by name so we can experience resurrection and share it with others. The deathly grip that darkness had on us is what is missing now. Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia, he is risen indeed!