

“Alleluia!”
John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

Mary Magdalene went out to the tomb of Jesus while it was still dark. For her, life had ended with the death of Jesus. Yet Mary was to find, much to her surprise, that life was just beginning.

I want to speak to those of you who are grieving the death of someone whom you love, which includes just about everyone. For some of you, your pain is still acute. Others, like me, found that the ache of the loss gradually receded. You got up, you went on, but still, at moments when you least expect, grief grips you again and you realize there are not many days in this life without loss. Those whom we love keep leaving, keep journeying to “that land from which no traveler has ever returned.”

Whenever violent tragedy strikes a community, a gaggle of “grief counselors” descend upon the place. They urge the grievers to talk it out, to express the hurt and rage, to weep, assuring the bereaved that this is therapeutic, despite the research that suggests such random grief therapy is of questionable value. After the tears, the rage and complaint, what then? What to do with the grief? I am all for expressing our grief, but in my experience something more is needed. Is there anything to be said to grief other than that it is a painful part of life?

After the rage, the well-meaning consolation of friends, the trite blathering of our elected elite, and the therapeutic tears, great death still sits on the throne, smug in death’s dark declaration, “I have won and there is nothing anyone can do about it.”

The apostle Paul says that we Christians do not have the kind of grief that other people do, people who don’t have any hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We still grieve, yes, but not without hope. What hope is there when those whom we love slip from our loving embrace?

A most intriguing story comes from Luke, chapter 15. I would like to share some thoughts on it. Here Jesus told a story about a father who had two sons. The youngest demanded his inheritance so he could leave home. The impudent, little jerk! As youngest son, he had no claim to anything belonging to his father. Surprise as his father takes his “livelihood,” all his life, and gives it to the boy who promptly runs off into “country far away” where he wasted every cent on booze and bad women. Eventually, in great hunger and want, the boy said to himself: “There are all my father’s hired hands with plenty to eat — and here I am, starving to death” (v. 17).

And when he was “a long way off,” the father saw him and ran and embraced him. The father, who must have been waiting for his troubled child to return every day, grieving for him, cried, “Let’s eat and have a party! This son of mine was dead, and is alive again!”

When the older brother refused to come in to the party for the prodigal, the jubilant father replied, “This brother of yours was dead and is alive again!”

Pondering this story I wonder how long the father waited for his dead son’s homecoming. For all he knew, his son was dead. I can just hear helpful friends telling him, “Face facts. He isn’t coming back.” Or, “You’ve got to get over it. Focus on your

older boy who's still here with you." And yet, the father waited. He waited. How long? We don't know.

As a pastor, as a being who is also human, it has been my experience that just about nothing is worse than the loss of a child. The saddest duty is being with parents when their young son or daughter has died. I suspect this prodigal boy in Jesus's story was about the age of a college sophomore. I can't imagine losing a son on the threshold of adulthood. Such grief, the father must have felt.

The son was still alive, but the father didn't know that. A young kid, pocket full of cash, first time away from home, is an easy mark. Still, the father waited, looked down the road in front of the house, straining to see, hoping for sight of the son.

We call it the story of the "prodigal son," but we could just as well call it the story of the prodigal (that is, reckless, extravagant) father. When the boy left home, the father recklessly gave him his entire fortune, and when the boy at last returned, the father recklessly threw a huge party, holding nothing back for himself. He loved his son extravagantly on his leaving, and he loved him extravagantly upon his return.

It's a parable of effusive, reckless, relentless, prodigal love. It's told by a Savior who, when the wine ran low at the wedding at Cana, made from water 150 gallons more wine. Most of us are Methodist, so in public at least, we might fain and hem and haw when asked if we know anything about wine, but still, that seems like a lot of wine. When the bread and fish gave out in the wilderness, Jesus said, "See, the basket is full. There's enough there to feed 5,000!"

Love tends toward excess, prodigality, and abundance. That's why I respect grief that's excessive. Once upon a time I went to a funeral that was primarily African-American. It was amazing, some of the most healthy grief I have ever seen. From what I have observed, the excessive, screaming, flailing grievers get done with their grief the fastest. It's interesting that those who screamed the loudest, when I talked with them, seemed to be the most centered and faith-filled.

When Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus had died, Jesus wept bitterly and the crowd seeing Jesus grieve was right to say, "See how he loved him!" Great grief often accompanies a great loss.

The uptight, do-right, older brother in the story was such a miser. When he got word of the huge party going on at the big house to welcome his wayward little brother back, he sniffed, "A party?! And on a Sunday?!"

We have got, in our worst moments, a miserly view of life. Life is a measured, finite, terminal, zero game. "Three score and ten" says the Bible. Life begins with such potential, such vitality, and then it wastes away to nearly nothing, to just a few faded memories, and now comes the "hour of dread," and the journey into that "far country," from whence no traveler returns. Friends will tell us to face facts, admit defeat, let go, keep a stiff upper lip, life must go on. What they mean is, grief goes on, and on, and on.

But what if the story Jesus told is actually true? What if God is a prodigal, a father who, when it comes to life, holds nothing back? The father loved the absent son as abundantly when he was away as when he was back home. The father waited in the

confident expectation that the good-as-dead son would return, would be back home, and then the party could begin.

Church, it is time to talk resurrection, eternal life. It is time to put our grief in context. We grieve, yes, and well we should, and our grief itself is testimony to what a gift God gave us in the lives of those we love. There is grief because the loss is real and death is definite.

Yet our grief is set in the context of our conviction that the same God who so recklessly, extravagantly, overflowed in giving life shall give life even in death. The father waits, confident that the far country of death shall not be the last word. The father waits, ready to give life and give it abundantly, to give more than we deserve — life eternal — not because of who we are but because of who God is, namely, extravagant love.

Those whom we have loved and lost have left us, but they have come home. The God who gave them to us, now embraces them for eternity, and they await us. Grief is not all there is. There is also home. And what we thought was home, was not home. This is only a way-station. And what we thought was the end, namely, death, is in Christ, the beginning. And what we thought was unredeemable loss, death, is in Christ, homecoming.

Note that the story of the prodigal son does not really have an ending. We wonder if the older brother ever let go of his sniveling logic, relaxed, relented, and joined the party. We wonder if the younger son ever learned from his mistakes and got more mature and responsible. We do not know. We do not get the inside scoop about the party. All we know is that both boys are finally safe, at home with the father, and that the father has at last got himself all he wanted: a family safe at home.

Maybe the story does not end because it is eternal. We know when the party began, but for all we know, it never ended. It is still going on. In the end, there is an eternal party for those daughters and sons who once were dead but now are alive, who once were lost but now found.

The ones we love and whom death seems so cruelly to have snatched, are not lost, but found, not dead, but alive in a God who shall not let miserable, miserly death defeat divine extravagance. What we experience as the pain of giving them up to that dark, far country is, through the eyes of faith, homecoming. Look at all God has gone through down through the ages to save us, find us, and embrace us. Look at all Jesus went through just this past week. Shall death defeat the purposes of such an extravagantly life-giving God? I think not.

As Mark's gospel tells this story we read that in the darkness of grief, the women came to the tomb to grieve for the dead body of Jesus. Here are the words spoken to them in their grief, "Don't be astonished; You're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has been raised! He isn't here . . . he is going ahead of you..."

"Going on ahead of you," the risen Christ, going on ahead, where?

Toward the end of John's gospel, Jesus told his disciples that he was leaving them. They were sad. Then he said, "I'm going to get a place ready for you...so that you can be there where I am." And they were glad at the thought that our hope, in life,

in death, is that the same God who raised Jesus to life everlasting will do the same even for us.

One of the most moving stories I have ever heard was from an elderly man who told me that on the week after his beloved wife of 58 years had died, he had a recurring dream that they were back in their first house as newlyweds once again. He was back home again, the home they designed and built together, a house whose every inch they cherished, and whose every corner spoke of his wife and her love of beauty.

In his dream, he would move from room to room and be surprised that all of the dispersed furniture was back in its original place. Every book was there, on the shelves, all perfectly remembered from that joyful innocent time.

He would awake and wonder why he kept having this dream of this house. "She never appeared in the dream," he told me, "though I could feel her presence there amid the place she created and lavishly loved. I kept thinking that she would appear there, in the home she loved, but she never did."

Finally, it dawned on him. It was not a dream about his being home again. It was a dream about her being home. She was now safe, embraced, at home with the God who loved her in life, now loved her forever. She was home. It was not a dream about the misty, lost past. It was a dream about a still unfolding, unexplained, unconstrained, extravagant future.

She was home and, by God's grace, so shall we as well. Jesus the Messiah has gone to prepare a place for us. Home. Happy Easter! Alleluia!

Let us pray—

Almighty and ever-loving God, we are creatures who cling to the gift of life, yet know that we must die. Our lives slip gradually from us, and we know there is nothing that we can do about our mortality. What we need is some hope outside ourselves. What we need is a future not of our own creation. What we need is saving from the grip of sin and death. What we need is resurrection.

On this great, bright day of days, you promise to give us what we need. Jesus the Messiah has burst the bonds of death and has shown us the way from death to life. Our Savior has gone on before us. Alleluia! Amen.

