

Easter

Love Wins!

April 9, 2023 Tabor Heights & Montavilla United Methodist

Rev. Heather Riggs

Matthew 28:1-10 CEB

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. **2** Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. **3** Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. **4** The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. **5** But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. **6** He isn't here, because he's been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. **7** Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, 'He's been raised from the dead. He's going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' I've given the message to you." **8** With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. **9** But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. **10** Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there."

Love Wins

Augusta was bewildered.

It all started with a summer fling with a handsome, Norwegian named, Ole. He was kind and smart and so different from all the stolid German farmers in her midwestern community. And then she got pregnant. Her strict German family were not happy with her, and it being 1913, what else could she do, but marry this handsome stranger from another country!

He was a professor of engineering in Norway, which meant the best he could do in America was a managing a railroad crew, so on the long, December night when the baby arrived, Augusta found herself hundreds of miles away from her mother, laboring in a renovated chicken coup in the wilds of Dooley, Montana.

The baby was born blue and not breathing, so the doctor swaddled her in a little shroud, and laid her on the sideboard, so that the family could bury her when they were ready. After everything that Augusta had been through, the shame in her community and the derision of her family, her hopes for a new life, she just couldn't quite believe that this

was happening. Here she was stuck in the middle of Montana in a railroad camp, married to a man she barely knew because of a child she now didn't have?

Sears Catalog Dress

It all felt so unreal that she climbed out of bed and put on her wedding dress - a cheap Sears catalog dress made of white cotton with machine lace inserts. She padded across the bare wood floor, picked up the motionless bundle... and it cried.

Augusta ripped open the seam at the lace insert in the front of her Victorian Sears catalog dress and put the baby to her breast. Her baby that was born dead was now alive.

My Great Aunt Alice showed me the ripped dress when she told me her story. Her mother, Augusta, had carefully wrapped the dress in tissue paper and saved it her whole life. Augusta carried it around with her from place to place as a symbol of hope and life.

Empty Tomb

Mary Magdalene was bewildered.

According to Luke chapter 8, verses 1-3, when Mary met Jesus, Mary was out of her mind, and Jesus cast the demons out of her. Then Mary, who apparently, was a woman with her own money, became one of the disciples who traveled around with Jesus and financially supported his ministry.

Maybe Pope Gregory the First was a little intimidated by independent women, because he was the one who first called Mary a prostitute in his 891AD Easter sermon (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene), but it's not true. Mary Magdalene was a disciple and a leader in the early church.

Jesus not only healed Mary's mind, he also showed her a whole new way of living. The Way of love, forgiveness and acceptance. A Way of unimaginable freedom, where a formerly mentally ill woman could be a disciple of a prominent Rabbi... that would be like being the grad-student assistant to Einstein, in 1914! A time when women were not admitted to the University of Berlin!

Jesus changed Mary's whole life and how he was dead. Mary Magdalene wasn't just burying her friend and mentor, Jesus; she was also burying her future as a disciple. No other Rabbi was accepting women as disciples!

They put Jesus in the tomb without preparing him for burial because it was the evening before the Sabbath. The Jewish Sabbath is observed from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, so Mary and Mary went back to the same upper room where they had shared their last meal with Jesus on Thursday, and I imagine they all ate leftovers and cried together.

I had a dream once, that Mary, the mother of Jesus, sat on a wooden chair stroking Mary Magdalene's hair as Mary Magdalene cried into her lap, but Jesus' mom couldn't even cry, because, after everything she had been through, how could this be the end?

So after the Sabbath rest, after Mother Mary had finally fallen asleep in her hard wooden chair, Mary Magdalene and another Mary, quietly slipped out of the upper room without Mother Mary, because no mother should have to swaddle her child in their shroud.

But when they came to the Tomb, they heard the joyful news that Jesus who was once dead, was now alive.

I was bewildered.

After 3 days of pre-labor and 12 hours of "official" labor in the hospital I had given birth to my daughter. I was so utterly exhausted that I didn't even notice that my midwife didn't lay my baby directly on my chest as we had planned, until I heard the the Labor and Delivery nurse say, "She's grey and not breathing."

But I wasn't afraid, because as soon as I heard that she was grey and not breathing, I thought of Augusta's baby, and I just knew that Gwen would be OK.

My baby, who was born looking kinda dead, is now 22 years old.

Love Wins

In our postmodern world there are many who ask why we keep telling these ancient pre-scientific era stories about preposterous things like casting out demons and bodily resurrection. My answer is this:

We tell our ancient, sacred stories for the same reason that my Great Aunt shared with me the story of her birth. Because they remind us to have hope in a bewildering world.

I confess that when I look at what has become of the world in the past few years, I am bewildered.

Facism and white supremacy are on the rise in many countries.

We've already passed the point of irreversible climate change and the people in power still value their money more than the habitability of our planet!

How on earth did we become a country where there have been 131 mass shootings, so far, in 2023? We're not even halfway through the year!

What happened to all of the progress that we had made in the US on civil rights for women, and people of color and LGBTQ+ folks??? What the heck, Florida????!!!

What kind of city do we live in that desperately needed supportive housing and transitional shelters are protested everywhere we try to build them, by people claiming that those suffering from addiction and mental illness don't deserve help????!!! At a public hearing about transitional housing last month some of my clergy colleagues were called, "fake pastors from fake churches," by actual Proud Boys.

What kind of a Church do I belong to, where outright lies have convinced about 6% of United Methodists that Progressive Pastors like me don't believe in the divinity of Christ????!!!

I'm a progressive Christian, so I put my faith in Jesus, not in the extra-biblical mythology of Satan.

And yet, I do know that there is something in this world that wants us to give up. That wants us to surrender to pain and grief and anger and shame and blame when life is bewildering. And, I suspect that whatever that something is - whether it's Satan, or just greedy, damaged, power-hungry people, that the reason they want us to give up is because if we just hold on to hope for long enough, Love Wins.

So I will keep telling and believing these stories of resurrection. I will let these stories remind me to not be afraid.

And I will hang in there, and keep showing up, and keep believing, and keep practicing love when others practice hate, and hold on to hope through the bewildering times that come and come again...

Because I know that Love Wins.