

Nobody saw Jesus rise from the tomb. Plenty of folks saw him die and be laid there. Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but no one saw Jesus come out. Some of them had seen Lazarus come out of the tomb when Jesus called to him. Even though he had been dead for four days, he came out all wrapped up in strips of cloth. But no one saw Jesus come out of the tomb.

Have you ever seen anyone come back from the dead? It's quite rare. Still, a very few people have interpreted their experience of an accident or of an illness as an experience of dying and coming back to life.

An orthopedic surgeon by the name of Mary Neal went on a kayak trip. When she capsized, the force of the current pinned her against the front deck of her boat, which was wedged against a rock. She couldn't get free, and her friends couldn't get her out, either. As the minutes ticked by, she knew she was going to die. Pinned in the boat and out of air, she gave up. She gave everything over to God, telling him, "your will be done."

When her friend was finally able to pull her out, she realized that she was watching the rescue effort from outside of her body. She saw them start CPR. She had no pulse and wasn't breathing. Her pupils were fixed and dilated. Her body was purple. When she saw all that, she thought, "Well, I guess I'm dead." She had been under water for thirty minutes before they finally got her to shore.

Then she felt her body and spirit break free and she was greeted by some people or some spirits, and was taken down an amazing pathway. She found herself dancing with them. It was like a great homecoming. What surprised her was that she didn't want to return to her body, even though she loved her husband and children very much. But compared to God's love that was flowing through everything, the love she felt for her family paled in comparison. She wanted to stay. But then, one of the spirits or people told her it wasn't her time and that she had more work to do on earth, and had to go back to her body. So, they took her back down the path and she sat down into her body. She spent the next five weeks in the hospital, recovering. Five weeks to let it all sink in. It totally changed her life. Each day took on new meaning.

Neither Lazarus nor Dr. Neal could go back to the way life was before. Their encounter with Jesus had changed everything. Nothing would ever be the same.

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But, something quite different happened to Jesus on Easter. He didn't just come back from the dead. Unlike Lazarus and Dr. Neal, Jesus will never die again. When Jesus meets Mary in the garden, he is different—so different that she doesn't recognize him until he says her name.

If it weren't for the resurrection, the story of Jesus' death would have never survived until today. There would have been nothing remarkable about just another victim of the Roman occupation, and he would have joined countless others in the murk of ancient history—a forgotten, untold story.

But, because of the disciples' experience of the resurrection and the power it had to change their grief to joy and their fear to courage, they told everyone about it, and it spread throughout the entire world as people in every generation reached out to tell those who had not yet heard: "Jesus is risen! He is the Son of God. The Kingdom of God is in our midst. We recognize God's love in him. We feel new hope, new energy, new enthusiasm, and new joy because we have discovered that Jesus is with us even if we can't see him like before."

Dr. Mary Neal says, "I absolutely believe that every person can look at their life and see the hand of God." But she says that most miracles are quiet. It's that person who calls you when you most need it. It's that person who directs you to someone who changes your life."

When Jesus meets Mary in the garden on Easter morning, she is weeping for her loss. When Jesus shows up, He changes her grief into joy, and then he gives her something to do. She has to leave the garden.

Many of us will be leaving here this morning to return home to worries about making ends meet, or to the familiarity of being alone, or to the ache of grief over a loved-one's death, or to the sorrow of an ongoing, chronic illness that

leaves us hobbled and exhausted. We may rightfully ask, “What difference does Easter make?”

I am tempted to invite you to ask each other this question—to turn to your neighbor and ask them what difference it makes to them to know that Jesus Christ loves them today every bit as much as he loves his father—and every bit as much as he loved those first disciples way back when.

What difference has Jesus’ love made in your life? What is your story? How has Jesus met you in the garden of your tears and changed it into a garden of meeting?

But this is the Episcopal church! We can’t be talking to each other about Jesus and about our experience of Jesus’ love. Besides, it would mean admitting that we, too, are Jesus’ disciples with a story to tell. We would have to do what Jesus tells Mary to do: to go tell the others that we have seen him and that he is alive. We would have to look forward to every day as the place where Jesus comes to meet us and where we experience hope. We might end up living in gratitude. We might find ourselves expectantly looking for signs of his presence and love all around us and then even seeing them! We might become more ready to forgive each other’s imperfections than to criticize them and talk behind each other’s backs. We might even recognize that because of God’s love, our lives have new meaning.

But, we’re not going to turn to tell our story to our neighbor right now. At the end of this celebration, we’re going to leave. And when we leave, we will return to our lives with a new purpose, because just like Jesus sent Mary, so, too, he sends us. We each have a story to tell, even if it is full of questions, doubts, and disappointments. Like Dr. Neal says, “I absolutely believe that every person can look at their life and see the hand of God. But most miracles are quiet. It’s that person who calls you when you most need it. It’s that person who directs you to someone who changes your life.” Maybe Easter means that we can be that person for someone. Or maybe Easter means that we can welcome someone who is that person for us. In any case,

Alleluia, The Lord is Risen!