

Beyond Human Possibility (John 20:1-18)

A little girl walked into the funeral home with her mother. As they approached the casket, the mother struggled with what to say. She finally told her daughter, "Grandpa's, uh, sleeping." The little girl looked at her mother, at the casket, back at her mother again, and then said, "It doesn't look like it. It looks like grandpa's dead." No matter how we try to dull the pain of death, whether by calling it sleeping or passing, dead is dead. Those of us who have suffered the death of a loved one are painfully aware that dead is dead. If we could have done anything within human power to bring our loved one back from the dead, we would have.

That's why today's gospel story touches us so deeply. We understand the pain Mary Magdalene felt as she walked, heart broken, to Jesus' tomb shortly before sunrise. She had seen Jesus nailed to the cross. She'd heard his last words. She'd seen his body placed in the tomb. But the arrival of sundown, with the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, hadn't allowed her to wash and prepare Jesus' body for a proper burial. So, now, three days later, as Mary Magdalene drew near to Jesus' tomb to do her Lord this last kindness, she had no expectations other than to find Jesus' bruised, bloody, lifeless body. Dead is dead.

When Mary reached Jesus' tomb, though, she saw that the stone sealing the tomb had been removed. Mary assumed the worst. Dead is dead, remember. And, for Mary, not only was Jesus dead. She herself was dead as well. Her joy, her hope, her desire to live, had all died. For let's remember who this Mary was. Forget about the thinking that she was once a woman of the streets, a prostitute. Most scholars now agree this wasn't the case. But this Mary was the one Jesus had healed from demon possession—possession by seven demons—meaning complete possession (Luke 8:2-3). Her life had been characterized by hopelessness. Mary, Jesus' mother, was called "blessed" by the angel. But this Mary, Mary Magdalene, had always felt unblessed—that is except for that short time when Jesus had been in her life. Jesus had been a light, a glimmer of hope that she had clung to. But she should have known that it wouldn't last. Bad things always seemed to find her. And so the power of evil had taken Jesus away from her. And now, when she thought it couldn't get any worse, it had. Someone had stolen even his dead body from her.

So Mary ran to tell Peter and John that someone had stolen Jesus' body. Peter and John ran with Mary back to the tomb. And it was just as she had said. The two disciples went into the tomb and found, where Jesus' body had been, only the cloths that had been wrapped around his body. Peter and John left at this point, but Mary stayed behind, crying outside Jesus' tomb.

After some time, though, she dared to look inside the tomb herself. But now it wasn't empty. Now, there were two angels in the tomb. And they said to Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary answered them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

It seems odd to us that at this point Mary didn't begin to have greater expectations, right? Not only was Jesus' tomb empty, but now there were two angels in it—talking to her! But even the sight of two angels, even the fact that she was talking with angels, meant nothing to Mary. When we're in the grips of despair, it's hard to see any light. When we've lost all hope, it's hard to ever be hopeful again. So Mary turned her back on the angels. And she kept crying.

Through her tears, she noticed a man was now with her. It was Jesus. But Mary couldn't recognize the presence of her Lord, because, well, dead is dead, right? And Mary still didn't recognize Jesus when he said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Mary thought he was the gardener.

So Mary said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Finally, Jesus spoke her name. "Mary!" And then, finally, the tomb of hopelessness around Mary's mind and heart began to open. She realized that something beyond human possibility had happened. Jesus was no longer dead. Dead isn't always dead, for while new life after death is beyond human possibility, it's not beyond God's possibility! And just as Jesus was now alive, so too Mary herself began to live again—in hope.

As we gather here this Easter morning, we have our own grief and sorrows — over lost loved ones; lost relationships; lost health; lost years; lost jobs; lost money; lost homes; lost opportunities; lost joy; lost peace; lost hope. Our grief and sorrows drag us into a dark tomb where it's difficult for the light

to penetrate. And in our despair, like Mary Magdalene, we tend to accept things the way they are. Dead is dead.

I read of a pastor who went to visit a church member who had been in an accident and had lost the feeling and mobility in his legs. At the close of the visit, the pastor prayed and asked God to bring healing. Suddenly the patient said, "Hey, there's a tingling sensation in my legs. Yes! I can feel my legs. I think I can—walk now." The pastor stammered something about not pushing it, but the patient struggled out of the wheel chair, stood on his feet, and slowly took a few steps. The patient cried out, "It's a miracle. God has healed me!"

When the pastor got to his car, he felt faint. He rested his hands and head on the steering wheel for a moment, then looked heavenward and said, "God, thank you for healing that man. Now, don't ever do that to me again!" Because the pastor had such low expectations, he never really expected that God would answer his prayer and that a paralyzed person could be healed or, and so, when something beyond human possibility happened, it terrified him!

How often we are like this pastor. We pray and look to God, but not really with expectation. We tend to just accept things the way they are. And so, how often we bow our heads to the evil, the darkness, the sickness, the loneliness, the injustice in the world and in our lives. How often we succumb to despair, thinking that we're at a dead-end or at the end of our rope and there's nothing to be humanly done. But, friends, on this glorious Easter morning, Jesus says to us, "Man, woman, you, why are you weeping?"

Like Mary, we might not recognize him. But he comes to us in our despair just as he came to Mary. Perhaps not in the form of a gardener but in the form of a friend who gives us an encouraging hug...or in the form of a beautiful spring day...or in the form of a song that touches us deeply...or in the peace we feel when praying. He comes to us in the silence of Holy Communion. He comes to us in the fulfillment we feel when we help someone in need. He comes to us through his words in our Bibles, telling us "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). And when we sense his loving presence, we come alive again—resurrected!

The real miracle of Easter is not that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that he continues to be alive, that he continues to come to us, and that he continues to resurrect us, giving us new life, just as he did Mary Magdalene on that first Easter so long ago.

There's no denying that death has a firm grip on us in this world. There's no denying that at times we succumb to despair. But the good news is that there is a power greater than death. The good news is that dead is not always dead. The good news is that beyond human possibility, there is God. Thanks be to the Lord of Life for always being present and lovingly and powerfully at work in our lives and in our world to bless us with new life. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; April 12, 2009 (Easter)