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Can It Possibly be True?
John 20:1-20

Surveys show that seventy-eight percent of Americans believe in heaven in some afterlife, with seventy-six percent confident that they will be admitted. But we're a little hazy on the details. In Revelation, John declares, "*There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain,*" so will heaven be the best parts of this life, without arthritis, cancer, conflict and war? In Revelation, the word for "end" is masculine, not neuter. So if "the end" is the person of Jesus, it seems that heaven is where we will experience Jesus' presence much more deeply!

And in Revelation, John records, "*God's servants will serve Him.*" This word "serve" in Greek is "diakonia," from which we get the word "deacon." Since deacons minister to and care for those who are hurting, heaven is a realm where we will praise God, joyfully celebrating, "*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and in you we have our being,*" and where we will deeply love and care for one another.

One author pictures a banquet hall, split in two. On both sides, platters of the finest food and goblets of the choicest wine cover the tables. And on both sides, eighteen-inch utensils are fastened to hands of the guests. So on one side amid groans and gnashing of teeth, there is anger and frustration, for no matter how hard they try, the guests can't maneuver the food into their mouths. But on the other side, there is joy and contentment, and the murmuring of "thank you." For here the guests feed each other. The first side, of course, with its selfishness is hell, and the second side, with its sharing and loving concern, is heaven!

But we are a little hazy on the details. In one memorable children's sermon, the pastor asks, "Who can tell me the meaning of resurrection?" One little boy raises his hand. "I'm not sure, but I know that if it lasts more than four hours you need to go to the doctor!" I'm not sure what the pastor could have preached to redeem the service

after that remark. So let's turn to our text. Part of our text was in our Call to Worship. Here's how the story continues:

John 20:1-20

Mary remained and cried. Looking in the tomb, she saw two angels who asked, "Why are you crying?" "They've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they've put him. Then she turns and sees Jesus, but thinks it's the gardener. He asks, "Who are you looking for? And when Mary asks for Jesus' body, Jesus says, "Mary!" Mary, then, shrieks in joy, "Rabbi." Jesus tells her, "To tell my brothers, and Mary races to tell the news, "I have seen the Lord."

Our story opens with the language of creation, "*Early on the first day of the week.*" That's Genesis language! So we think of beginnings, that something startling, unprecedented, and new is about to happen -- but what? And notice that the witnesses are women, including Mary Magdalene. In ancient Israel, women aren't considered valid witnesses.

So if this is a made-up story, a feeble attempt to cover up Jesus' tragic death, John would have used male witnesses. Mary Magdalene's presence adds both credibility to Jesus' resurrection and gives women in that and every era a newfound dignity. The women stay faithful, while Jesus' male disciples do not! Throughout the years of communism in Russia, it is the babushkas, the elderly women, who keep the faith alive, and now the church in Russia is steadily growing.

The church at this moment is down to a handful of believers. It is hanging on by a slender thread – just like a troubled marriage, or a dream we have, or an addict sliding downhill, or perhaps our faith. Today, are you just barely hanging on? But don't count God out, for God is always at work! Even if your faith is the size of a mustard seed, stay engaged. When Scottish preacher A.J. Gossip's wife dies, he's asked, "Have you lost your faith?" Gossip immediately snaps back, "For God's sake, haven't I lost enough, without losing that too!"

As Mary nears the tomb, she's spooked, for the tomb is empty. Someone has rolled away the great thousand pound, cartwheel-shaped stone. So she runs for Peter and John. Peter's arrival is significant. The previous Thursday night he denied his master three times. He fails his Lord in the time of crisis. But now he regains his courage and returns to his fellow disciples. Failure isn't final! When we fail, we get up and get back in the game. We do not ever give up!

Peter and John race to the tomb, enter and find that the grave clothes are in place, as though the body has evaporated, forming a cocoon. Suddenly John realizes what has happened. Significantly we have no account of the resurrection itself. What we see are the effects! Likewise John's Gospel compares the Holy Spirit's movement to the effects of wind. We can't see a gentle breeze, but we can feel it and see the breeze move the leaves of a tree.

And that's the nature of faith. St. Paul encourages the Corinthians to believe fervently in eternal life by writing, *"Do not lose heart. Though outwardly we waste away, inwardly we are renewed day by day. For today's troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory, far more magnificent than we can imagine. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, which is temporary, but on what is unseen, which is eternal. For if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven."*

Faith isn't certainty; faith is trusting despite our doubts. But nor is faith blind! Very few people give up their lives for something they know is true; no one gives up their lives for a lie! So if Jesus isn't raised, why do His disciples claim that He is?

As Peter and John return home. Mary stays near the tomb, clinging to hope. So discipleship is staying close to Jesus, regardless of the circumstances. Then she sees who she thinks is the gardener. She asks, "Sir, did you take away His body? The man says simply, "Mary." Mary's heart skips a beat. Can it be? Can it possibly be? It is! It is Jesus, raised to new life!

This is the most glorious news of all time – that sin, evil and death itself are defeated. The Apostle Paul is right, *"If Christ is not raised, our faith is useless; our hopes are dashed; we are still in our sins,*

and life ends at the grave.” But Jesus is raised, so even in the worst of tragedies there is hope!

Early in my ministry, I conducted two heartbreaking funerals for the same family back-to-back. The husband had an asthma attack while playing volleyball, and an inexperienced EMT put a breathing tube down his esophagus not his trachea, and the husband needlessly suffocated. Weeks later the family’s only son died in a third world country during a routine appendectomy. Both deaths were needless. At the son’s funeral, I said, “*John*’ is alive! He has passed from life to life eternal. In that moment, the John’s uncle audibly gasped, as though hearing the Easter message for the first time. Afterwards he told me, “I finally have hope.” We do! For we can sing, “*Lord, by your wounds on Calvary; From death’s drear sting Your servants free, That we may live eternally. Alleluia!*”

Jesus’ resurrection is the most glorious news of all time – for we worship not a deceased Teacher, but a living Lord, who promises, “*Lo, I am with you always.*” The phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, “*He descended into hell,*” means that Jesus has fully borne our sin, and has personally experienced the worst that life can bring – hunger, exhaustion, rejection, betrayal, suffering and even death.

So He is present in the refugee camp when a mother wonders how she will feed her children, when we’re so depleted we wonder if we can go on, when a friend turns against us or a spouse betrays our marriage vows. Jesus is on cancer wards, and in nursing homes, and when we cry ourselves to sleep after some trauma. And in the moment of death, He welcomes us to our eternal home, where there will be “*no more death or mourning or crying or pain.*”

And this brings us to the table this morning, for this sacrament is not simply the recalling of our Lord’s body being broken and His blood being shed, but it is a banquet table, a foretaste of heaven, where all are invited, where the hungry are fed, where earthly divisions are healed, and where we will join in intimate union with God and one another.

I’ve told you of dining in Malawi with the clerk of Lisanjala’s Session. The two of us sit at a rude table. He brings out a small bowl of rice,

beans, spinach, and one hard-boiled egg. With great reverence, he cuts the egg in half and invites me to partake. That was a foretaste of heaven, where we will join together in unity, love and peace, and where all will have enough.

Easter is a day of hope, for death has been defeated, and our futures are utterly secure. Easter is a day of empowerment, for in no circumstance of life, will we ever walk alone. And Easter is a foretaste of heaven itself, where our joy and peace and victory will be complete. Thanks be to God. Amen.