Sermons at Christ Church

Be God's Light That Shines In The darkness.

Easter Sunday
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

That one word which sets in motion our victory dance. The past couple of days have been incredibly difficult for my friend. She lost everything that she had worked for and looked forward to. She told me her story. In a way, I wish I could do something to help her. But I couldn't do much. As we sat in silence, we both found ourselves staring at the floor upon which our feet sat.

When she departed, I picked the Bible to read and offer myself some reassuring words. I opened to John 20, and that was when I realized who the woman was and what she'd been looking at all along. She was Mary Magdalene, and she's been looking deep into the darkness of the empty tomb. She's been looking into the tomb because it is the closest she can get to the man she called Rabbi. She had been with the Rabbi who called her, restored her and offered a new life of purpose and meaning. As a prostitute, she lived on the margins of society, she was used and abused by men both great and small. And then she met a man who invited her to look at life in a different way. And when she did, she came to realize that her life was worth more than she could ever bargain for-she followed him.

She's followed up until now, it's been three days since they took her new song away from her. She cannot sing. She's cried more than she had ever cried in her life. Behind her lies the temptation and attraction of a former meaningless life. She gazes into the darkness and there's nothing to see but waste, indignity, disgrace and despair. Mary looks into the deep darkness of the tomb which awakens us to the desolation that often comes with being alive. Beside the tombs hewn in the hills outside the walls of Jerusalem is the paradox of all our lives: the beauty and vibrancy of creation on the one hand, and the everlasting darkness of doomed death on the other.

The eternal question is, wherein lies the ultimate truth? Between the vibrancy of creation and the darkness of death, wherein lies the truth?

But wait. Mary can hear someone whisper that morning has broken like the first morning, she can hear the Blackbird speak like the first bird, she can feel her feet wet from the dew, and she can see the rising sun beyond the horizon-a new morning. As she looked towards the darkness of the tomb, she hears that one word which she had known all her life-her own name. 'Mary.' The one who is looking into the darkness of a world without God suddenly hears the word, that one word which changes everything.

That one word which turns our mourning into dancing, sadness into joy, grief into laughter and despair into hope. Mary lightened up when she heard her name. "I am the Good shepherd" Jesus reminds her. I know my sheep and I call them by their name. That one word which sets in motion our victory dance.

Easter, if you like, asks some strange questions, are you alive? What is your name? Do you ever hear the Rabbi call your name? What imprisons you? Like Mary, you need to turn round to behold the Rabbi who calls you by your name because He knows your name. To hear your name is to hear that one word which sets in motion our victory dance.

Within Mary's turn and our turn, we experience the whole gospel. Jesus is Adam, the first man, meeting Eve in the garden, and simply asking Eve, could we please start this again? Jesus is Abraham, the embodiment of God's covenant with Israel, meeting Sarah, and asking her, 'Could we go on a new journey and become a true blessing to the world?' Jesus is Moses, the liberator, meeting Miriam, and asking, 'Could we begin our long walk to freedom?' Like Mary, we also turn from horror to elation, from depression to joy, from abyss to glory. A few moment ago, death engulfed everything. Now, Mary is inhabiting a story of new beginnings, new blessings, and a new sense of belonging. It often takes one word. Henry Baker in his poem *"I Am Not Worthy, Holy Lord",* writes this:

I am not worthy, holy Lord,
That Thou shouldst come to me;
Speak but the word; one gracious word
Can set the sinner free.

Baker knew that there's only one word which sets in motion our victory dance, one word which sets us free. And so he invites the Lord to speak that one gracious word which we can set us free.

When Mary heard that word, she reached out to embrace the risen Rabbi. She celebrates, she shares the wonder. Because of COVID we can't embrace but think about every embrace you've ever known: the cuddle of a child, the reassurance of a friend, the greeting of a companion, the ecstasy of a lover, the consolation of a sympathizer and the strength of a rescuer. The embrace of Mary is the definitive embrace of all time: Mary meets her maker, redeemer and the one who empowers her, above all she meets her Rabbi. Every time we hug someone we are reminding them of this most important hug of all. This is the touch of life, hope in the face of death, solidarity in the midst of bewilderment and reunion after trauma.

Mary embraces her Rabbi and wouldn't let go. But then she hears the Rabbi upend her grip on him. Don't hold on to me. I am here for you just as much as I am here for everyone. Don't reduce love to the intensity of the moment, don't restrict the glory to just you and me. Within that embrace Mary discovers her true freedom as she hears the Rabbi invite her to go, go and tell my brothers that I am alive. Are you alive? In the midst of this pandemic, do you feel alive?

She who was powerless, pitiful and dejected is now purposeful, focused and energized. Her task now is to tell. She has news to share, she's seen the glory of God, and she has truth to share. The news she has to share with the brothers and the world is one of Christ overcoming death, the glory she has seen is one of Christ pulling all of creation from hell. The eternal question of wherein lies the truth of human life has been answered for her. The truth lies in the vibrancy of creation and life, and death cannot supplant the creative purposes of God.

Our question this Easter morning is, how long can you stare at the bare floor? How long can you stare in the darkness of an empty tomb? I want to share a text message I got from a parishioner who has been battling cancer for some time. He writes, "As I mentioned at the Vestry Meeting on Tuesday, I was at University of Maryland all day for scans, PET scan, CT scan and MRI to get me ready for my radiation treatment after my chemotherapy and other trial medications. Markings have been made on my body for radiation to start on April 7. My world renowned urologist Dr. Walsh has been very upset with me for even considering radiation because he said that will be harmful to me and not beneficial, but the oncologist also felt that was the only way out for me. I was at crossroads and didn't know which way to take so I decided to put that into prayers and ask God to reveal to me which way to go. It has been a difficult week and I have prayed a lot and I know many people have prayed for me also. This afternoon, I got a call from one of the oncologist and I was very hesitant to get the call but I got it anyway.

He said after going through all the scans very thoroughly and carefully and consulting with the tumor-board, they have decided that there was nothing to radiate, they couldn't find our see any cancer to radiate, so the radiation was called off. This is the best news I have had in over 10 years." Alfred has stared at the bare floor for so long he couldn't believe he's been given another shot at life. The Rabbi called his name. The one word which sets in motion our victory dance.

On this Easter morning, the Rabbi calls your name and invites you to allow yourself to be a resurrection story-a victory out of the prison in which you are trapped to a new kind of life. Allow yourself to hear that one word which sets in motion your victory dance, allow yourself to be happy, not because everything is good but because you can see the good in everything.

Easter reminds us that nothing divine can die. And so today, because you heard Christ call your name, do the victory dance, for Christ is alive. Alleluia. Amen.