

What are some of your favorite stories? Maybe a story that begins with, "Once upon a time." Or maybe one that begins with, "A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Maybe it's a movie that you can watch over and over again, and you know what the characters are going to say, you can recite the lines along with them. Perhaps it's a book that you read when you were a child, or had read to you and now you've had the chance to read it to children or grandchildren of your own. What's one of your favorite stories? Whatever that might be, whether it's a picture that you have in your mind or an image that you carry with you, I want to invite you to consider that this story that we hear today might be one of those the same stories. Just like movies that we can watch over and over again and catch something different each time, or a book that means different things for us at one time in our life than in another, this story of Easter can be heard over and over again.

Yet each year we find ourselves in a little bit different place. Our circumstances have changed even if just a little bit, and those around us are a little bit different, some new and some that are no longer here. The same story that we hear year in and year out, and yet it is still good news. Let's go back and remember the story on the very first Easter morning. It was the first day of the week, it was the day after the Sabbath. Do you remember the Jewish holy day was on Saturday? And they were beginning their workday much like people here in Barrington would begin tomorrow morning. It was a day of regular business, and most people were about that work but not everyone. You see, there were a group of women that had a job to be done because they'd left it unfinished several days ago. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were up early before sunrise, before the sun was up. They were going to Jesus to ... they were going to the cemetery because they hadn't finished preparing Jesus' body.

They hadn't been able to do this when He died because it was the holy day and they had to wait until it was completed. So here they are a few days later finishing the work that they had to do, finishing it on Sunday morning. I can imagine they weren't excited about it, it needed to be done and it was an honor and a privilege perhaps, and yet arising before sunrise to go to a cemetery may not be your first choice early in the morning. We read that as they were walking up to the place where Jesus was they were saying to each other, "Well, who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" And when they looked up, they found that the stone had been rolled away. It was a very large stone. Now as scholars tell us that it was a large stone indeed, probably one that would have taken four or five strong people to move it out of the way. But here it was, the tomb was open.

Imagine for a minute with me if you went to a cemetery and you were going to pay your respects to a loved one and the grave was open, not a great day, not to be expected. And yet here, this is the circumstance for these women. But then, it continues even more surprising going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side, and they were startled. This is one of the places in the Scripture where I think the words that we have translated for us just don't really get to the real meaning of it. Now, they say that they were startled, and I think startled is like when you catch a movement out of the corner of your eye, when you don't expect to see something, or maybe there's a shadow when you're getting up at night to go check on something. Startled is something like that.

Now, when I would think about entering a tomb and finding no one there, not the person I was expecting but someone else, startled I think just begins to scratch the surface of ... I don't know, the terror, the fear, the anxiety that they might have been feeling at that moment. But what we have here is that they were startled. The angel gives us a bit more response. He said to them, "Don't be alarmed." Now alarmed began to maybe get a little bit more about what they were feeling. "You're looking for the

Jesus of Nazareth Who was crucified. He's been raised, He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid Him. Go tell His disciples, especially Peter that He's going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see Him there just as He told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. They didn't tell anyone right away, and this is the beginning. This is the story in the Gospel according to Mark.

Because they were afraid, I can imagine that they could find themselves in those circumstances, especially on a morning like they had just had. I wonder, have you ever found yourself in a place like that? Have you ever found yourself in a place where you are so overwhelmed by the circumstances that you just don't know what to do? So terrified about what you find around you that you're uncertain, and you just want to get away. Circumstances in which you find yourself that you say, "Can I just be somewhere else at this time?" Times when you just don't know what to do? Maybe you find yourself in that place today, here on Easter day. And if you're not there today, maybe you have a memory about what a time like that was in your life. And if you don't have a memory of that, I imagine that sometime in your life, you'll have an experience where it feels like the wheels are falling off your life. The truth is that bad things happen in our lives. Life doesn't always go how we planned. We look at the world around us and people are oppressed, they're ignored.

People turn to hate instead of love all too often it seems. We live in a world where people are killed by hundreds in Sri Lanka, where children are abused, where people in our communities don't have enough food to eat or a safe place to sleep. You don't have to look far in the news every day to see that there is violence that tears apart communities on a regular basis, there is darkness in the world. But it's not just the things outside that you might read about in the news, when we're honest with ourselves, there's some darkness that's inside each of us. When we're left to ourselves, we can tend to act selfishly instead of generously. We can ignore the needs of other people and focus only on ourselves. We can break down relationships with others instead of building them up. So when we find ourselves in a world like this, what does this Easter story make a difference? How does it apply to the way that we're living today? That question gets to the heart of the story of Easter.

God knows all this, God sees the evil in the world and God grieves over it. The reality of evil, and sin, and darkness in our world needed to be cleaned up, needed to be taken care of, needed to be brought to light, and needed to be forgiven. God's response to the sin and evil in our lives, both inside and outside of us is not to force us into line to make us obey the rules and crush anyone who disagrees. That's not how God works in our world. Instead, God sends God's only Son to win us over by love. Jesus, the One that God loves so dearly is born as a baby and He lives as one of us. He showed us what life is like as one of God's own children, He proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus taught us what it's like to live as a part of God's kingdom. Do you remember what it's like? God's kingdom is like a place where the first will be last, and the last will be first.

God's kingdom is a place where sinners who repent and know that they've done wrong, enter into first before righteous people filled with false virtue. It's like a wedding banquet to whom all are invited, yet some ignore the invitation. God's kingdom is like a father who has a message waiting for his messed up son to come home and when he does, he celebrates and throws a party. God's kingdom is a world that's turned upside down by love. What we expect to happen is not how things actually are in God's kingdom, God's kingdom came with Jesus Christ. But this message was too much for some people to take, it was outside of their comfort zone, it wasn't what they were used to. They hadn't always done things like that

around there. It overturned what they assumed about their religion, Jesus was a threat and became someone that needed to be eliminated. So He was arrested on Thursday night, put on trial long after dark and executed on Friday.

And when Jesus was hanging on the cross, He took on Himself all of the evil and the darkness from the very beginning of time until the very end of time, and He took it with Him into the very heart of darkness. All of the evil, and the sin, and the ugliness which we find in our world, even our own sin. Those things that we wish no one would ever find out about, Jesus carried all of it when He suffered and died on the cross. He descended into the depths of darkness and evil so that He could leave those things behind, and drag us out from darkness into light. This is the story of Easter. This means that we can look forward to a day when Christ returns and there'll be no more pain, or suffering, or death anymore because this life will be passed away. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. God offers us the opportunity to experience a life today that is filled with love, and joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self control. This is life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, this is life in God's kingdom.

We can live as a part of God's kingdom today. Of course, being a follower of Jesus doesn't always mean that things are going to be easy, it doesn't always work out how we would like. And yet God knows what it's like to experience suffering, God knows what it's like to see the death of a child. But death is not the end of the story, Jesus has been raised. So when you're filled with terror, and dread, and fear, keep going. When darkness seems to overcome you, keep going because the worst thing that you can imagine is never the last thing because of Jesus' resurrection. One day our tears will be replaced with laughter, our confusion will be clarified, and our broken relationships will be healed. The resurrection is stronger than any evil, and there's always hope. Always hope. This is what Easter means for our lives today. But you might be sitting there and say, "You know, that sounds really good preacher. This good news of Jesus Christ, and the One who died and lives. He's not dead, He's alive.

That's just not for me. You don't know where I'm at. It's a nice enough story, but really do you believe that it's true?" I'll tell you, I know that it's true because I've seen it in the eyes of the people who have experienced it. I've seen it in families that have been brought back together, I've seen it in hope when people find themselves in desperate circumstances, and I've seen it in your eyes. This hope of the resurrection is made it real. It's a real thing, and you can live it today. If you live in Barrington and you don't have a church community, we invite you to join us here at Barrington United Methodist Church. We know that we don't have it all together, yet we're trying to follow God, Jesus, we're trying to live as a part of God's kingdom and we'd love to have you join us. If you want to follow Jesus and experience the power of the resurrection, if you want to be certain that death, and sin, and evil will not be the last word, you can and all you have to do is ask.

It's a simple prayer to say, "I'm sorry, and thank You, and please." To recognize that we messed up and say, "I'm sorry God for all those things that I've said and done, for the ways that I made mistakes." To say, "Thank You Jesus for living, for dying, for being raised for me." And finally to say, "Please God, come fill me with Your spirit and help me live for You." And you may not be sure if you want to pray a prayer like that, and that's okay. But if you'd like to, I'm going to invite you to join with me as we prayed in just a minute. If you want to pray, then maybe it's the very first time that you prayed a prayer like that, or maybe for you it's the first time in a long time, and maybe it's a prayer that you pray every day of your life for years and years. But wherever it is for you, you don't have to pray it out loud, you can just say quietly or under your breath.

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Just repeat after me, "I'm sorry, thank You, and please." Because Jesus, the One who died, lives. God is with us. Holy Spirit is present with us now, and we can experience life in God's kingdom. Will you pray with me? Jesus I'm sorry for all the times in my life when I messed up ... and if anything comes to mind, just ask for God's forgiveness.

(Silence)

Forgive me of my sin, and all that I know is wrong. Thank You that You died on the cross and rose for me. I trust You with my life. Help me receive Your forgiveness. Please fill me with Your spirit, and help me to follow You. In Your holy name, amen.