

I don't even want to turn on the television set. When I do, the screen flashes, 1,329,814 confirmed cases, 73,839 deaths worldwide. The United States: 356,414 cases, 10,490 dead. Hot spots. New York, Louisiana, possibly Florida. They talk about a curve, can't wait for the curve. But even if the curve takes place, Corona disappears, the death rate always remains a constant. One per person. Sure would be nice if we could turn the tables on the death stats. People who die, return to life. Well friends, that is exactly what happened on Easter. The number of dead that day grew smaller. One Person came back to life after being in the grave for a couple of days. The return to life of this person, has sparked hope and optimism into the hearts of millions of people. Of course, I am speaking of Jesus Christ. Today he has turned the tables on death. He has turned the tables on the real meaning of COVID. Covid really means: Christian Optimism, Victory In Death.

Let's take a look at a pessimist named Mary Magdalene and see how she became an eternal optimist. Today I want you to walk along side of her. her shoes. I want you to feel her sadness, her pain. But I also want you to feel her joy and comfort when she realizes that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. How does the resurrection of Jesus Christ change you? This morning we find the answer...

We find Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and she was crying. She was shedding tears of hopelessness, tears of despair and frustration. For some time now, she had been following the Teacher, Jesus Christ. She had thought that perhaps he was the Messiah. He had healed her of demon possession, and more importantly, he had shown her how to have peace with God. He had made so many promises. He had said so many good things. He had even performed miracles. But now he was dead. And all the things he had said and done were dead with him. How can you hope in someone who is dead? For Mary Magdalene, the world had become a very cruel place – a place of broken promises, unfulfilled dreams, and big disappointments. And to top it off, it seemed that someone had stolen the body of Christ – could things get any worse? It's no wonder that she's crying.

Have you ever had moments like Mary Magdalene? Moments when the world seemed like a very cruel place – a place of broken promises, unfulfilled dreams, big disappointments? The world can be a very difficult place to live, and the Devil uses those difficult moments to make you feel hopeless and despairing. The Devil wants you to say to yourself, "God is dead. There is no hope."

A lot has happened since last Easter. Last Easter, we had a roaring economy with the lowest unemployment levels in decades. Every villager was out and about, dancing up a storm at one of the squares, or planning a cruise or a trip to visit family and friends in other states. If you had retirement savings locked up in the stock market, you were admiring your huge gains. But in less than 6 months time, your stock market savings have gone down 30 percent. You may be part of the 10 million who are now unemployed. If you do go out in public, you now wear a mask if you have one, or you just try to grab items quickly at the store, and stay away from anyone. People who last year enjoyed the pastor coming over for a devotion at home, now say, "Let's have a devotion on the phone. You may be tempted to think, "Where is God?. Seems like the air has gone out of the balloon of hope.

When you look into your past and consider all the mistakes you have made in life, all the words and actions you wish you could take back, but you can't, you cannot help but feel a sense of hopelessness. "Is there any way I can change the past? Is there any way I can make right the wrong things I have done?" The answer is no. And then we feel what Mary felt – an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair.

Mary was dealing with the death of a loved one. What happens when you have to deal with that? Perhaps you've dealt with it, or maybe you're dealing with it right now. When a loved one dies, or when you face your own mortality, it feels as though you're facing the end of the road. To think that there is anything positive beyond death is far-fetched, we say to ourselves.

What hope does the world have to offer? Not much. "This is all there is," many people say, "So you better grab what you can while you can." That turns people into very self-centered creatures, glorified animals really. A life that is truly here-focused, me-focused, is truly a wasted life, and with it comes loneliness, greed, and ultimately, hell. Maybe that person puts on a happy face, but it's a face that's covering up feelings of hopelessness.

What hope does the world have to offer? Be a positive thinker, people say. Can you imagine going up to Mary Magdalene as she's crying, and saying to her, "Everything will be alright, Mary, just think positive thoughts!" That's ridiculous. And yet, that's the best comfort our world is able to offer. To tell someone to be optimistic without any real reason for being optimistic is really quite silly. That causes even greater feelings of hopelessness and despair. There has to be a reason to be optimistic.

Mary Magdalene found that reason on Easter morning. She looked into the tomb, and found that it wasn't empty after all – two angels were in the tomb, and one of them asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," Mary said, "and I don't know where they have put him." Then she turned around, and there was Jesus, standing right behind her. She didn't recognize him right away. Jesus asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Mary wasn't thinking clearly. She thought that Jesus the gardener. She said to Jesus, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." At this point, Mary still believes that Jesus is dead. She still believes that his body is missing, that she must find the body so that she can give it a proper burial. The Messiah was still dead. There was still no hope.

But Mary was wrong – there was hope. Jesus said to her, "Mary." So many times, Jesus had called her by her name while he was alive. And now she heard that familiar voice call her name called again. She looked up, and realized that it was Jesus. The Bible tells us that she was so excited that she called out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" which means teacher. She grasped Jesus' legs and did not want to let him go. Somehow, he was alive! Jesus told her that she need not to hold on to him like that any longer. He wouldn't be leaving her in death, like he had done before. Soon he would be returning to the Father, but he would be with her and his followers always. "Go, and tell the brothers that I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary quickly returned to the disciples and told them that she had seen the Lord.

What a turn-around for Mary! One minute God is dead, and there is no hope. But then she sees that Jesus is alive. God is not dead. There is hope! There is a reason to be joyful, to be hopeful, to be optimistic. Jesus was alive and well, and that's what changed her. Her hero was alive. We all love heroes. But there is only one hero in all the world who has died, and then has come back to life – Jesus Christ.

This one-on-one moment that Mary has with Jesus also belongs to you. When things look hopeless, remember – it's not a dead end. There is another way that leads to hope. There was once a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. Some of his friends asked him, "Why have you become a Christian?" He answered, "Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go. And there in the road were two men, one dead, and one alive. Which one would you ask which way to

go?”

For every person in life, there is a fork in the road. To be a Christian, or to not be a Christian. One way is littered with nothing but death – unfulfilled dreams, broken promises, empty optimism, charismatic leaders who are dead. But there is another way, and in that fork stands someone who is alive. Someone who does not break his promises, someone who knows what your dreams are and promises to fulfill them beyond what you could ever imagine, someone who gives you a real reason to be optimistic. In verse 16, when Jesus says, “Mary,” you can substitute your name there. Jesus comes to you, during your lowest moments in life, when it seems as though God is dead, that there is no hope, Jesus comes to you, and says to you, “Why are you crying?” And then he calls you by your first name, and reminds you: “I am alive. I have risen from the dead.” And, like Mary Magdalene, you see your risen Savior. You find resurrection hope, joy and comfort and relief, the same feelings Mary felt that first Easter morning.

The death of a loved one, your own death – you no longer have to feel hopeless when you face those things. Jesus calls out your name, and reminds you that he has experienced death himself, he has overcome death, and promises you that because of him, death is not the end of the road for you.

When you look into your past and you wonder how you can ever make up for all the mistakes you have made, Jesus calls out your name, and reminds you: “I died for your mistakes. God the Father has accepted my sacrifice for you – that’s why he raised me from the dead. I’m alive, and that’s proof that God has forgiven you. You do have peace with God right now.”

Only one thing can bring hope to a hopeless situation. Only one thing can bring joy where there is only sadness. Only one thing can bring life where there is nothing but death. Only one thing can give you a real reason to be optimistic. And that one thing is knowing that Jesus Christ is alive, right now – he has risen from the dead.

It is true that empty things can be the pits. From empty cereal boxes to empty cartons of milk, from empty gas tanks to empty refrigerators, from empty wallets to empty checkbooks, from empty nests to empty chairs at the dining table. From empty promises to empty threats, from empty hearts to empty lives. But there is one empty thing that is not the pits, and that is the empty tomb on Easter morning. That empty tomb filled Mary Magdalene’s heart with an incredible sense of joy and comfort and hope. It changed her life forever. Jesus is just as much alive today as he was on that first Easter morning. The comfort and hope you receive this morning from the Word of God is just as real as the comfort and hope Mary received. Mary returned to those disciples a different person – someone whose world had changed for the better. As you leave here this morning and return home, may you carry with you that same hope that Mary felt. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.