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## **“Believing the Signs of Life”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Resurrection of the Lord / Easter (Year A)**

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**Colossians 3:1–4; John 20:1–18**

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It is unclear what Mary Magdalene intended to accomplish visiting the tomb of Jesus early that morning. In other Gospel stories of Easter, several women made their way to the tomb to complete the rites that Jesus' hasty burial before the Sabbath precluded. In those stories, these women ask one another who will roll away the stone so that they can complete their task and responsibilities. Yet they continue to plod forward without resolving their dilemma of how to gain entrance.

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene alone goes to the tomb while it is still dark. For that day, it is unusual for a woman to be by herself in such circumstances. For safety, for camaraderie, for comfort, for conversation, everyone knows that even a trip to the powder room cannot be made solo. Yet Mary Magdalene appears unafraid, and she does not wonder about the stone door to the tomb being an impediment to her mission, whatever that might be.

Perhaps this is her first opportunity to grieve in solitude. When we are with others, many of us are burdened with caring for them in their grief. Solitude, at least for a few moments, can be a blessed retreat to focus on one's self, on our loss.

And so Mary Magdalene goes only to find that the gravesite has been disturbed. The stone, which protects the dead from the living and the living from the dead, has been removed, exposing the entrance.

Now she is afraid, and she runs to break her solitude, telling Peter and an unnamed disciple her worst fear: “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and his body’s whereabouts is unknown.”

Peter and the unnamed beloved disciple quickly discover more than what Mary has seen and concluded. The body is gone, the tomb is empty, the grave clothes are neatly tucked away. The purpose of the tomb is unfulfilled: the unwinding of life, the decay of what once was, the place of sorrows and remembrance—all of these are abandoned.

They came and saw and left and did not know that Jesus was alive: “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

They could not see the signs of life.

Mary Magdalene must have followed closely behind the two disciples, for when they left, she was once again at the tomb alone. Entering the tomb for the first time, she finds messengers sitting where the body of Jesus should be. And they ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

What a strange question for Mary Magdalene. It is equal to the question posed in the other Gospels: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The signs of death have been swirling about the past several days. Isn’t it obvious?

Witnessing a horrific crucifixion, participating in an abbreviated burial, coming to visit the tomb—the signs of death were all around.

We know the tears of Mary. Our loved ones have died. Justice has miscarried. Sickness and greed remain entrenched. Truth has been entombed. The good is defeated.

It is in Mary’s encounter with the risen Lord that the signs of life begin to take focus. “I have seen the Lord,” and that changes everything that can be seen.

Two thousand years later, when we hear Mary's proclamation, it can sound to us, as it did to the disciples, an idle tale. The story has been told before, and we have heard it before. Scores of Easters have come and gone.

Frequently we in the church plod forward and carry on as though we have come to bury the dead. Hurt and heartache have clouded our eyes from seeing the eternal purpose. Fear and sorrow have stooped the soul from grasping life and fulfillment. Conflict and injustice grind down the human spirit until we are estranged from our neighbors and ourselves. Tombs of selfishness and greed, burial clothes of pride and arrogance: the signs of death are all around us still.

We know the story. Nevertheless our lives reflect, not the proclamation of Mary Magdalene as she abandons the tomb and becomes the first proclaimer of the Good News from the tomb. Rather our lives reflect resignation, mourning, the overwhelming burden of life.

Yet today we hear anew the Gospel story, and again we are asked: "Why are you weeping?"

The resurrection of Jesus means that what was defeat has turned into victory. The resurrection of Jesus means that what was death has turned into life; that what was hopeless has turned into possibilities for healing and peace and reconciliation and love! He is risen, just as he said, just as we have been told again and again!

Are you and I looking for signs of life? Are we seeing the signs of life that are all around us? It is so important that we see them, it is so important that we get this correct.

Over every situation, over every encounter, over every struggle and challenge and opportunity that we experience, we need to write in bold letters:

L – I – F – E. "LIFE!" Resurrection means there are signs of life and God is at work!

If you and I are not seeing those signs of life, we need to write in bold letters over whatever we may be viewing to remind us—signs of life are there! God is at work there! And if God is at work, we are called to join God in that work.

Where might we see those signs of life?

Do any of you read the newspaper or watch the news on TV? Violence and war, greed and corruption, ineptitude and incompetence that rules this world, and over that, we need to write the word “LIFE” because this is our Father’s world, God has not let it go, and we—you and I—have responsibilities for good in this world.

I know that you and I go to the gas station. What might the word “LIFE” mean painted over every gas pump? Perhaps it would be a reminder that we are called to be stewards, responsible users, aware consumers of all the natural resources on which this world depends. By reducing our own personal carbon footprint and supporting policies that promote ecological responsibility, the entire globe benefits.

Do any of you use the bank? Over every sign of a banking institution, we can paint in our mind the word “LIFE” when we remember that Jesus pushes us to sort out what is truly important in life. Where our treasure is, there is our heart.

What about city hall, state and national government? In our mind’s eye, we need to paint the word “LIFE” over every government institution. We don’t do so to impose our faith on others, or because we need the government to prop up our beliefs. The right use of power anticipates the day when a new Jerusalem will come, a sure sign of God’s reign on earth, when resources are no longer squandered by a few but shared freely with all; when there will be no more tears or crying, and death shall be no more.

Can you see the signs of life *now*? We need not wait until death visits us to know the power of the resurrection!

You can see signs of life at Habitat for Humanity as homes are built in Durham and Honduras so that families may purchase and become home owners. That

provides housing security, builds financial equity among the poorest, family stability, and community recovery and hope.

You can see signs of life as people join together to create a living minimum wage in the fast food industry. The average age of fast food workers is 29.

What used to be a high school kid's spending money earned in summer jobs is the sole income many families live on, and it provides merely a subsistence living. When others stand with these workers, there is a ripple of life that brings not only quality but also dignity.

You can see signs of life among the hungry, the homeless, the thirsty, the imprisoned, as people care for these children of God. In every soup kitchen where nourishment is offered, with every meal taken to the home bound, with every visit to the sick: "When you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

You can see signs of life in parents as they struggle to do the best for their children while shouldering the burden of providing financially, emotionally, educationally, and spiritually for them. We parents occasionally get a glimpse of the reality of which Jesus spoke: these little ones are those through whom God's realm of justice and love will come, and we can never enter it until we become like them.

You can see signs of life in hospitals and clinics, among doctors and nurses and therapists, as the drama of healing and recovery and restoration are enabled because of the gifts and skills and dedication of many.

Cancer, divorce, violence: these are not the final facts that determine the fate of people. Resurrection is the assurance that the final words about us and our world is not death but life. "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly."

The tomb has been abandoned; a sign has been posted that says, "Welcome home, no matter your sin or significance, no matter your skin color or sexuality, no matter your bank account balance or cultural background, no matter your mental health or your politics. Welcome home, welcome to life!"

I hope you can see it at every entrance to this church, maybe if you look closely enough. And if you don't see it, then paint the word "LIFE" in your mind across every door because God bids us welcome home here.

Even at the cemetery, at the graves of our most beloved ones from whom we may feel so distant, we hear the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life!"

Resurrection is not only past history; resurrection is not only a future expectation. *Resurrection is life now.*

If we, like Mary Magdalene, weep, let it be for joy, because we see the signs of life all around us!

I note with appreciation borrowing the image of painting words across the tableaux of life from a sermon by James Lowry.