

**Sermon Title: The Word after the words**  
**John 20:1-18**

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For two days the Word of God was silent, sealed in the tomb.

The One whose voice is good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, whose voice broke the bonds on injustice, whose words calmed the sea and healed the sick was crucified, died, and was buried. It appeared that sin, and death, and the worst we could do had finally won. We had succeeded in pushing God out of the world, out of our lives, and onto the cross. There would be no more word from the Lord. Everyone knew death was the end. Death is death, you don't come back. Jesus words, it appeared, were final after all.

In the silence, Mary stood weeping outside the tomb of Jesus. She had been with him as he journeyed to Jerusalem. On the way she witnessed him heal the sick, care for the brokenhearted, restore sight to the blind, strengthen the weak, feed the hungry, and eat with sinners and the outcast. She was there when Jesus confronted the principalities and powers of this world and proclaimed the reign of God. She was there when Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And yes, Mary was there to the bitter end, watching the life drain from the body of the one who she and the disciples believed to be the Word of God in the flesh. How could this happen? The bitter disappointment, the anger, the frustration, the fear, the sadness, the sense of loss, of betrayal, all welled up within her, as if out of body and overcome by grief she found herself on Easter morning Mary standing, without hope, weeping outside of Jesus' tomb, his final words were spoken from the cross were, and he now lay silent.

Mary's weeping outside of Jesus' tomb is in some way symbolic of how all the disciples of Jesus must have felt that first Easter morning. Without hope, forever separated by death from the one they knew and loved, lost and alone, guilt-ridden for having betrayed their Lord, God-forsaken. They thought he would be the one to save them and to restore Israel. His words had inspired, and healed, and touched them to the core, but his voice, the voice that was the voice of God had gone silent.

In some way, at some level, Mary's sadness is also our sadness. Mary's anger and fear are the world's anger and fear. Mary's broken heart points to the broken hearts of millions who today stand, without hope, wondering who might save them, wondering if they will hear a word from the Lord. The disciple's guilt and shame at their betrayal of Jesus reminds us of how we've failed God, how we've given in to our lesser selves. Is there any hope for them and for us this Easter day? When we find ourselves in a place like this where is the word of the Lord to be heard?

We all know someone who, like Mary and the disciples, is pretty sure the final words have been spoken, and they wonder if there is any hope, any good news, any reason to press on, any light in the darkness, if God will speak to them and their need? Talk to the widow whose husband died of cancer recently. She has seen Good Friday. She may believe the Easter Resurrection is coming – but for now she is caught somewhere in between.

Talk to the husband reeling from his wife's exit of their marriage. He knows Mary's sadness. Talk to the child who is forgotten and neglected; talk to the mothers and fathers who watch their children waste away because they cannot provide them with enough food, enough shelter, or enough medicine.

Talk to the prisoner who is deeply ashamed of what he has done and whose family and friends long ago stopped visiting. Talk to the ones who know today is Easter but believe church is not a place where people like them would be welcome. Talk to the ones who believe they have no future, no better days, because they are so ashamed, so bound by a horrible past. They all know life after Friday but before Easter has come. They all know, and sometimes so do we, what it is like when the Word of the Lord seems to have gone silent. And so many wonder, maybe even some of us, is there any hope, any good news?

Now some might ask, why didn't God just raise Jesus up immediately? The moment they sealed the tomb, God could have crushed the soldiers and rolled the stone right back where it came from. But God waited; God seemingly did nothing for a time. There were days when God seemed silent. As someone has written, "Perhaps it is because God knew we would experience life, and loss, and love in just this way. We have hope – but the waiting can be a silent nothing." Life can be like Saturday. Good Friday has happened, but Easter has not yet arrived and we find ourselves in between - hoping and waiting for something new. And so, there is Mary, there is the Church, on Easter morning outside of Jesus' tomb, in the silence, waiting.

*“As Mary wept she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but she did not know that it was him. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him, ‘Rabbi!’” (John 20: 11-16)*

There, out of the silence, Mary heard a familiar voice. It was unmistakable. The sheep know the Shepherd's voice and they follow. (John 10:27) It was the voice that said, "Rise and walk", "Your faith has made you well." It was the voice that said, "You are forgiven, go and sin no more." It was the voice that said "Come, follow me." The same voice that said, "Love one another." The voice that in the beginning spoke into the silent nothingness, "Let there be..." and all that was, and is, and ever will be was created. It was that voice Mary heard speaking again into the silent void, words of compassion, of grace, of hope, of love. Turns out, the final words weren't so final after all.

On Friday the principalities and powers of this world murdered and buried Jesus of Nazareth. Friday and Saturday were for his disciples days of weeping, of waiting, of uncertain futures, of hopelessness, of a kind of paralysis brought on by their guilt and shame and fear. They were days of silence. But on Easter God came back.<sup>1</sup> The gates of Hell and death could not contain him.

You know sometimes we feel as if we live our lives like Mary somewhere in between Friday and Sunday, weeping at the tomb, unaware of Easter, unable to hear God's voice. We may sometimes feel like we are caught in sin, that we are unable to free ourselves from our past; that we are burdened down by guilt, or anger, or resentment, or fear, or shame. But today, my friends, is Easter and I'm here to bear witness to the good news that on Easter God came back. Christ came back to Mary, and to each one of his disciples, called them by name, forgave them, renewed their friendship, and bid them come and follow. On Easter life began again.

Today we are reminded that we are an Easter people – though life may sometimes feel like Good Friday or the Saturday in between we are not a Good Friday or Holy Saturday people - but an Easter people. No matter where we find ourselves this day there is no darkness that can overcome his light, there is no sadness that he has not transformed, there is no guilt or sin that is not forgiven and overcome, and there is no death that has not been conquered. On Easter God has come back to those of us who stand weeping, wondering, lost, angry, or afraid, calls us by name, speaks a word into the silence, and invites us to continue the journey, on the Way from death to life.

Mary stood by the tomb weeping. But from the other side of the grave, the word of God resounds, Jesus called her by name. And in that moment Mary experienced the power of resurrection and the Easter good news that nothing can separate us from God's love.

"The power of God, which at first took Christ out of the grave, is available still to us, not merely at the end of life, not at the hour of our death, but available here and now, the powerful word of God that liberated Jesus from the bonds of death is available here and now to resurrect these

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<sup>1</sup> from a sermon by Will Willimon.

dusty lives of ours and to help us live life abundantly.”<sup>2</sup> And therein lies our hope. The risen Lord comes to us from the other side of death to offer us life, to transform our weeping into tears of joy. The power which on Easter Day shattered the silence of death is now given to us to live. This is the good news of Easter, which renews and enlivens the most oppressed and disillusioned and defeated of all people into a risen, conquering soul. This is the theme that inspires our music and preaching and empowers our witness. This is our hope. The same power that rolled away the stone that first Easter, is available for us today.

My friends, wherever you are today, whatever Good Friday’s you have known, whatever cross you bear, if you find yourself somewhere like the silence of Saturday, living between loss and hope. Hear the good news of Easter. God has come back. The crucified Son is also the risen Lord. The victim is also the victor over sin and death. The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty, the darkness is dispelled, the light shines, a new day is dawned. We are an Easter people. Not a Good Friday people, not a Saturday-life-in-between kind of people, but an Easter people. Whatever fear, or loss, or guilt, or shame, or brokenness, or sin you bear in your soul this day – Hear the good news. Christ is the victor! “Beyond the pain, beyond the loss, beyond the cross, there is an empty tomb. And there - new life begins. It is a life of joy, and peace, and hope, and love, because Jesus, who we believed had spoken his final words and then grew silent, today Jesus comes to you and to me, and calls us each one by name. Today the Word of God speaks, “Take heart, do not fear, come, follow me.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.