

“Never Again Alone”  
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Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Back in the days of World War II, a near catastrophe took place on the bottom of the harbor in New York City. A Navy submarine got stuck down there. The crew inside tried everything they could to dislodge it, but the situation grew worse with every passing moment. Hours went by, there was no electricity, and their oxygen was running out. The situation was dire.

In one last attempt to rescue the sailors from what was quickly beginning to look like a steel coffin, the Navy sent a ship equipped with divers to a spot on the surface of the water directly above the sub. They lowered a diver over the side and he made his way down into the frigid water to the submarine. The trapped sailors heard the metal boots of the diver land on the exterior surface of the sub, and they moved to where they thought the rescuer would be. And there, in the complete and utter darkness, surely scared to death, they tapped to him in Morse code, “Is there any hope?” (On-line, Rev. Dr. William L. Self, Johns Creek Baptist Church)

You know, when I read that story, and got to that line, “Is there any hope?” my mind started reeling. “Is there any hope?” could easily be, if we let it, the theme song for these days in which we live. Is there any hope, when a crazed man can go into a place meant for good, a community center for those hoping to become American citizens, and open fire, and kill so many innocent people?

Is there any hope, when an unbelievably greedy man can, in a Ponzi scheme, wipe out the future security of thousands of people who trusted in him?

Is there any hope, when I can go to a meeting with 9 people, and fully a third of them, tell me that they’ve just lost their jobs?

Is there any hope, when within spitting distance of this church, drugs are for sale on the street and prostitutes stroll the sidewalks?

Is there any hope?

Most assuredly, that question loomed large on that first Easter morning too.

Is there any hope? Actually, they knew the answer to that question, and the answer was no. There was no hope, because Jesus was dead and gone.

Everybody knew it. They had seen Him cruelly nailed to a cross, and left to die a gruesome death in the noonday sun. They had watched Joseph of Arimathea take his body and put it in the tomb and cover the tomb with a great huge stone.

Jesus was dead and gone. There was no hope on that first Easter morning.

Mary Magdalene knew that when she crawled out of bed in the wee hours of that morn, but she had to do something anyway. She couldn't just sit there and cry. There was not a shred of hope in her heart, only deep, deep despair and grief.

Everything in her life was shattered. The new confidence that she had known because of Jesus was gone. Her belief that she could start over in a new way seemed hollow. The sure knowledge and confidence that she was a beloved child of God now seemed shaky.

Because Jesus was dead and gone. Jesus, the One who had touched her and set her free from her past. Jesus, the One who set her on her feet again, and who treated her like the special person she was. Jesus, the One who made her feel like she could do anything . . . was dead and gone . . . how could she go on? What could she do? She was absolutely, positively alone; absolutely, positively lost in a world suddenly empty.

Is there any hope?

She walked to the tomb shrouded in despair, hopeless. I expect that all she expected to see was that great huge rock in the same place it had been when Jesus was buried. But as she approached that's not what she saw at all. What she saw, startled her, and no doubt, sent a chill down her spine.

The great stone had been rolled away, and the horror of the crucifixion that Mary Magdalene knew was the worst thing that had ever happened, suddenly grew deeper. All she could imagine was that someone had stolen Jesus' body. They couldn't leave it alone, they couldn't let Him rest in peace, the evil just got worse and worse - somebody stole His body.

So she ran back and got two of the disciples, and pleaded with them to come and see. Which they did, but then they went away again.

And there she is again, all alone, in utter, utter despair and hopelessness. Timidly, she peeks back into the tomb and there she sees angels who ask her why

she's weeping. She explains that she is weeping for her Lord.

And then she turns around and there, in the garden, stands someone else - a man whom she guesses is the gardener. He too asks her why she's weeping. She tells him the same thing, only this time she asks him if he took Jesus' body.

Then all of a sudden, the man speaks, and He says one word. It is her name. "Mary." And in that moment, with that breath of a word, her eyes are opened and she realizes it is Jesus, standing right there in front of her. Right there in front of her! Alive! Living! Breathing! Speaking! There is hope! There is hope! He is alive!

She knew it just as surely as those sailors in that submarine did, for as they tapped on one side to their rescuer, on the other the diver tapped back, "Yes, there is hope." And so there was.

And so there was for Mary Magdalene, and so there is, for you and me, because of Jesus' victory from the grave. There is hope because death no longer has the final word. There is hope because evil was put down. There is hope because sadness and despair no longer last forever. There is hope because Christ's resurrection from the tomb means that all things are possible - even things we thought were impossible.

In Easter, there is hope, and because of the hope and promises of Easter, we, who are Easter people, are changed people. Easter changes us.

Easter surely changed those who were there on that first morning of joy. Their lives were completely turned upside down. The cloak of despair they had been wearing was cast off. Their sadness and grief swept away. Their helplessness over the tragedy of it all suddenly turned to action - if God could raise Jesus Christ from death, what couldn't He do through and with them?

As one pastor put it, "The disciples came out of the Upper Room where they had huddled in fear, and they went to the ends of the earth, and they created a mighty church despite the efforts of emperors and princes to stamp it and them out of existence. They went from being people afraid of dying, to being people who offered their very lives to help others come to the faith, and hope, and joy that they had. The disciples were changed by their faith in the resurrection and in the God who brought it about: they were given power to heal and help others, power to conquer their own fear and despair and power to defeat the fear and despair that afflicts others. That (the pastor concludes) is what the resurrection is about, what our faith is about." (On-line, Richard Fairchild)

Easter had the power to change them, and Easter has the power to change us, no matter what our lives are like, no matter what we're going through. The power of God in Easter, the power that raised Jesus Christ from the bonds of death, is the power that changes us this and every day.

A man named Reynolds Price could tell us about that. He wrote a book about it, called *A Whole New Life*. Reynolds' old life was going along just fine, thank you very much, when he received a very bad diagnosis from his doctor - a life-changing diagnosis of a disease that would leave him paralyzed and wheelchair bound for the rest of his life. He had been living a robust, adventurous life, and the diagnosis stopped him in his tracks. He well might have asked, even though he knew the answer from a medical standpoint, "Is there any hope?" He well might have thrown up his hands and given up, given in to despair and depression and feeling sorry for himself.

But because of Easter, because Reynolds Price was a beloved child of God and faithful follower of Christ, he started over. As his friend William Willimon put it, "Reynolds learned not to be confined to a wheelchair or confined anywhere for that matter. He started over. He wrote some of his best fiction during this time when his life could have ended." Because of Easter, he was changed. He saw light instead of darkness, hope instead of despair, good instead of evil, life instead of death. He saw possibilities even in the midst of life-changing struggle. Because of Easter. (Pulpit Resource, April 2009)

Because of Easter, my dear friends, we can face the living of these days, however uncertain and difficult they may be. We can face them, and we can face them yes, even with joy, because we know that ultimately God is in control, and all will yet be well. The powers of darkness, death and defeat were conquered in Easter. And, as one woman put it, "If God can turn the crucifixion, humanity's darkest hour, into the resurrection, our greatest hope, He can and will turn the tides of darkness we experience today in our own personal lives." (On-line, Sarah Beteux)

All we need to do is claim it for ourselves. So let me invite you to do so by way of a final story. A ship and its crew had been at sea for months, and with every passing day the navigator knew that they were veering perilously off course. The entire ship thought that they were hopelessly lost. Except for a few days' worth of cereal, they were out of food. They had completely run out of fresh water, and when the crewmen could not bear their thirst anymore, they would take just a sip of salty sea water. They knew death was just around the corner.

Then one morning, at the crack of dawn, miraculously they saw in the distance a passing ship. Apparently, the ship saw them too, because soon enough,

they drew closer, and the two ships began sending signals back and forth.

The captain of the distressed ship told the other captain that they were in dire shape, and that they desperately needed food and water.

A strange signal came back to him. “Lower your buckets.” Lower your buckets? The captain signalled back, “No, we need fresh water for drinking.”

The signal came back again. “Lower your buckets.” Well, the captain was confused, but knowing that his crew was desperate he did what the other captain ordered, and lo and behold, when they drew the bucket up out of the water and drank from it, they discovered it was fresh water!

What they didn’t realize, was that they had drifted out of the Atlantic into the waters of the Orinoco River just where it met the ocean, right into its plentiful bounty of fresh, wonderful, life-giving water! (On-line, Rev. Dr. Del Staigers)

Now, why did I tell you that? Because the fresh, wonderful, giving water of life has been given to us in the resurrection of Christ, in Easter. But we have to lower our buckets, and accept it. It’s right there, we’re right in the midst of it, we only have to receive it as the great gift it is from Almighty God.

Is there hope? You bet there is! Because of Easter, there is always hope. Because of Easter, never again, never, ever again, will we be alone. Never ever again will death have the final word, will bad news have the final word, will sadness and sorrow have the final word.

So go forth from this place in the power of Easter! Go forth and face all the days ahead armed with the Good News that in Christ all things are possible, and all will yet be well. Go forth knowing that nothing can ultimately defeat you. Go forth and know that God loves you, He knows you by name, and every step of your journey, He is with you. Because of Easter, never again, never again, will you be alone. Thanks be to God! Hallelujah! Amen.