

Natalie W. Bell
Easter Sunday 2024

Mosaic: God Uses All the Pieces
John 20:1-18

*Early on the first day of the week, **while it was still dark**, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been **removed** from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “**They have taken the Lord** out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he **saw and believed**, ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*¹¹ But Mary **stood weeping** outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb, ¹² 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. ¹³ They said to her, “**Woman, why are you weeping?**” She said to them, “**They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.**” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she **did not know** that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “**Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?**” Supposing him to be the **gardener**, she said to him, “Sir,^[b] if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “**Mary!**” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[c] “**Rabbouni!**” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” ¹⁸ **Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.***

Well, we made it!

It’s **Easter** Sunday---we’ve walked through the **40 days of Lent**.
We’ve learned that God uses all the **broken pieces** of our lives.
We’ve walked through the **joy** of Palm Sunday,
the **gift** of Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper,

and the *sorrow of the crucifixion* on Good Friday.
 We've seen the *brokenness* in the Easter story—
 All while dealing with the *brokenness of our own lives*.

We are ALL broken, aren't we?

We have pain and problems in every one of our lives,
 even though most people struggle in silence.

The best sign I've ever seen is this:

"Everyone is going through something you know nothing about".

It's so true.

I see and hear it every day as a Pastor.

And during this Lenten season we talked about that—
 how ***God knows our brokenness***,

And uses all the broken pieces to create something ***beautiful***.

Our lives are like a ***mosaic of jagged pieces*** that come together in beauty,
 just like the mosaic we made with Lincroft Church,
 on display in our Narthex right now.

There's no denying our brokenness.

The question is how do we find ***HOPE in it?***

And where is ***God*** in it?

And what does ***Jesus rising*** from the dead have to do with our brokenness?

Well, what if this story—this Easter story—is truly the ***Greatest story ever told?***

And what if this Easter story is the story we ***need to hear***,

BECAUSE of everything we are going through today?

I know I need it, what about you?

Rev. Kate Haynes Murphy writes in the *Journal for Preachers*

that according to literary scholars,

there are ***only SEVEN stories*** in the world.....in every book, poem, and song:

1. Overcoming the Monster

2. Rags to Riches

3. The Quest

4. Voyage and Return

5. Comedy

6. Tragedy

7. Rebirth

Supposedly, every story is a *variation* on one of these seven primary stories.

But Murphy says that she believes there are really only *TWO Stories: The Fall and The Redemption.*

Or: *Death and New Life*

AKA: *Good Friday and Easter Sunday.*

And, she says, *‘we BECOME the story we BELIEVE.*

Kate Haynes Murphy, *Journal for Preachers*, vol. xlvii, No. 3, Pg. 14

Nigerian Poet Ben Okri says

that we are LIVING the stories that have been planted in us,

or the stories that we have planted in ourselves,

and *‘if we CHANGE the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our LIVES’.*

Ben Okri, *Journal for Preachers*, vol. xlvii, No. 3, Pg. 14

What if this story of Easter *could change our lives?*

What if we *NEED this story*—of New life? And Redemption? And Resurrection?

What if we need to *BELIEVE* it?

And *LIVE by it?*

It’s a POWERFUL story—

On that Easter morning long ago, while it was still dark,
all Mary and the other disciples could see and believe was
the *story of brokenness, and death.*

They had seen their Lord and friend Jesus *crucified* on a cross.

A horrific death.

They saw him take his last breath,

his lifeless body taken down,

wrapped in cloth and laid in a borrowed tomb.

So, when she *arrived at the tomb on Easter morning*

She was there to prepare his body properly for burial,

and instead found an *empty tomb,*

she *believed the story of death,*

of a *fallen world, and broken, jagged pieces.*

She *assumed* his body had been stolen.

Another cruel act.

Isn't this the story we often believe—the STORY OF DEATH and despair...?

We see it everywhere--the story of kids dying in Gaza, Jews attacked in Israel, soldiers lost in Ukraine.

It's the story of racism and prejudice,

And people left behind.

It's the story of migrants considered non-human,
or transgender kids bullied to death.

We often live by the story of cruelty and suffering,

Because we hear it, from cynical politicians, big mouth leaders,
talking heads and depressing new headlines.

We so often believe the story---***that the world is getting WORSE day by day.***

When do YOU believe that story?

The story of the Fall? Death? Destruction?

When do you give into the idea that the world is horrible, and only getting worse?

It's so easy to believe that.

It's the plot line of almost all news.

But followers of Jesus—have a DIFFERENT narrative.

We have a different ***way to LIVE,***

And a different ***story to BELIEVE.***

We ***Have the story of Life,*** and Redemption, and Resurrection.

Like, when we ***witness the smile of a baby,***

Or hear soul-stirring ***music,***

When we see the beauty of the ***sunrise,*** or the ***laughter*** of old friends.

When we experience the ***bond*** between parents and children,

or the ***fellowship*** of friends in Christ.

When do YOU believe the story of New Life?

You know, the whole time she was following Jesus,

Mary saw the BETTER story—

She saw the way of ***grace and forgiveness,***

And ***New Life.***

Because that's what ***Jesus brought with him—***

And that's what Jesus ***offers all of US*** today.

He offers the way of *new life and redemption---*
right in the middle of our world, that is so full of death and destruction!

In his book *Mosaic: When God Uses All the Pieces*,
Shane Stanford says that God uses all of the brokenness,
Even death and destruction,
All of **OUR jagged pieces**,
To make a *beautiful mosaic of our lives, and our world*.

But Stanford says that it's *hard for us to believe* in the mosaic,
because we live *in between—the stories of Death and Life*.
We *see BOTH* stories.
We see the death and destruction in this world,
but we also see redemption and new life.

According to Rev. Murphy,
we have to **CHOOSE which story to believe, and live by**,
and that is the story *we BECOME*.

We will *witness BOTH stories* on this side of heaven.
Because God isn't done with us, or creation, just yet.
Jesus *has come bringing* in the kingdom of God...
but we believe *he's coming again to redeem* everything and everyone.
That is our hope.
And our future.

So, we have a **CHOICE about which story to live, and become**.

Will we live in FEAR about all the evil in the world?

One thing that is so sad about current politics is the constant focus
on everything **WRONG** in the world and in our country.
For some, it's as if we are literally descending into the depths,
and will not recover.

Some say we *only had good times in the past---*and we have to get back to that.
A lot of people believe the *bad* story,
And live by the story of the *Fall, of death, and destruction*.

And it's understandable.

Because of the news,
but also because *we are constantly facing trials and suffering*.

As a pastor I see this every day.
 So many people are facing real death and despair.
 Pain, grief, illness, lost hopes and dreams.
 You have your pain—your struggles—your suffering.

But is that the ***ONLY story we believe?***
What if we chose a DIFFERENT story?
 Not that we deny what's happening,
 but what if we found Jesus in the midst of our pain—
 the same way Mary found Jesus in the garden on Easter?

What if we choose HOPE? What if we focus on the ***GOOD?***
 This is why I love news with positive stories,
 like CBS Steve Hartman's On the Road segment.

There is ***so much good*** in this world.
 People are helping one another.
 Miracles happen—in health, and relationships, and community.
 The sun comes up in the morning.
 We are all alive and breathing—we're here, today!

If you ever need to hear good stories, just call me.
 I can share ***amazing profiles in courage, hope, and love***—in this church.
 In this community.

Or call a beloved friend or family member,
 And ***tell them how much they mean to you***----
 and soak up the ***joy and gratitude***.
 There is good in this world!

And what about reaching out to God—just to say THANK YOU?
 When was the last time you offered—a prayer of praise?
 We spend a lot of time asking for things, talking about things,
 How much time do we spend in gratitude?

We all know the ***power of gratitude***.
 Keeping a ***journal of blessings*** is life-changing.
 Making a ***list of just 5 good things each day*** can turn your whole life around!

What if the same thing is true of prayer?

Of giving thanks to God?

Of ***praising God***—in worship, or study, or prayer?

What if that can turn our lives around?

Because it gives us ***a different perspective, right?***

It opens our ***eyes to the story of New Life*** and Redemption.

When have ***YOU SEEN New Life?*** And Resurrection?

You know the bulbs we plant in the ground? Look at them now.

Look in the windows around you.

What if there IS new life—all around us?

If we ***pay attention?***

And ***believe?***

Mary believed in death and despair.

But when she stayed at that empty tomb, she received the story of New Life.

She saw Jesus-alive and well.

At first, she assumed him the gardener,

But then he called her by name.....Mary.

The same way God calls us by name too.

And that moment opened up a whole new world.

And a whole new story!

What if Easter can do the same for US today?

Professor Karoline Lewis writes that what we really need on Easter

is not so much ***PROOF*** that Jesus' resurrection happened....

As much as we need the ***PERSPECTIVE of resurrection power*** in our lives today.

Mary's story gives us that perspective.

Because she sees Jesus,

And when he calls her by name, she understands---He is alive!

He has been raised from death.

And there is a NEW STORY: ***Life over Death.***

Do WE have that ***perspective?***

Do we believe that ***Life is more powerful than Death?***

Christians believe that Jesus is alive today.

His ***Spirit*** dwells within and among us.

He is present in this world—in the joy and the hope,

But also in the pain and the suffering.

If we have the eyes to see him, and believe in Him.

When have YOU felt His Spirit?

When have you been moved by His ***power***?

When have you heard him ***calling YOUR name***?

I sure believe that Jesus is alive,

I've felt that Spirit, and power.

It's the power that helps me get out of bed in the morning,

And put one foot in front of the other.

I believe He wants us to ***live in hope, not fear.***

We don't have to live by the story of Death and Destruction.

Someone has written a BETTER STORY.

So, what if we opened our hearts and minds to the Spirit
of the **ONE WHO IS the better story?**

The story of New Life, Hope, and Redemption.

The Easter story!

That's why we are here!

We have an amazing story to LIVE BY,

a wonderful story to BECOME.

Are you ready for that?

That is the ***Good News of the Gospel*** this Easter morning.

And for the story of New Life,

all God's people can say together, Amen.