

Easter 2019

Holy God, as once long ago you turned a gray dawn into a springtime alleluia, so come to us this morning and turn our sadness into joy. Call us by our own names and lead us back to the land of the living. Come, risen Christ, surprise us with your grace.

An amazing story of loss, sorrow, bravery, common prayer, and Faith occurred at the start of Holy Week. And I am not talking about the release of the Mueller report. As the roof and spier of Notre Dame burned, with firefighters sending water upon the cathedral, hundreds of locals and visitors stood praying and singing hymns.

Thousands of people throughout the world watched in horror and prayed.

In surveying the aftermath the next day, The Right Reverend Nicholas Dill, Anglican Bishop of Bermuda stated: "As the smoke cleared in the early hours of the morning in Paris on Tuesday and the firefighters who had worked to save the 850-year-old Cathedral of Notre Dame from burning to the ground surveyed the scene of the interior, almost, as it were, glowing from within the charred mess a golden cross stood out again the darkness".

If you have seen the photos, it is true. In the midst of darkness and ruins, the golden cross above the altar stands out as a symbol of hope to many. Over and over again in human history, hope comes out of tragedy. This happens in the world, in our nation, in our communities, and in our private lives. Often, we are unable to see this in the midst of tragedy, but in time hope becomes apparent sometimes in the smallest details.

The details in this morning's gospel from John may seem small in significance or so familiar to all of us, that we read right over some important story points.

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb very early that morning. Seeing that the tomb was empty, she ran back to tell the disciples. Peter and John responded and went into the tomb to see that it was, in fact, empty. Then they left and Mary was alone and crying with sadness and fear I imagine. When she again looked into the tomb, two angels were present.

Then she turns and sees whom she thinks is the gardener.

Mary is the first disciple to see and talk to the Resurrected Christ. None of the 12 apostles were there. Mary delivers the first message of hope.

What do we know about Mary of Magdala based upon Scripture?

--She was a follower of Jesus who had cured her of an unknown ailment. Luke 8:1-3.

--She was at the crucifixion. John 19-25

--She prepared Jesus's body for burial. Luke 24: 55-56

--She was the first to see him after the Resurrection. John 20: 1-18

Most of the other stories that we have heard are conjecture.

It is very likely that she was an important early leader in the church in spite of the fact that she was a woman in a male-dominated society.

She was an immense person of faith.

Author and spiritual teacher Joan Chittister states: "Hope is the ability to believe that good can happen out of anything.

I have no doubt that Mary had hope after speaking to Jesus that morning.

Are we able to find that same hope in the midst of everything that is happening in the world, in our country, and for some of us, in our personal lives?

Several years ago, the Rev Becca Stevens came to Ministry Fair. She started Thistle Farms over 20 years ago, which is a nonprofit social enterprise, based in Nashville, TN, dedicated to helping women survivors recover and heal from prostitution, trafficking, and addiction.

It provides the women a safe place to live, a meaningful job, and a lifelong sisterhood of support because they believe that love is the most powerful force in the world. The program started with 5 women and she soon realized that poverty was a huge reason that women ended up back in the same situations that abused them. So, a store was started that still sells healing products today. These women live and work at the farm in Nashville for two years, healing each other in a faith-based setting so they can graduate back into their communities with renewed strength and faith.

One of those women, whose name is Sheila, is coordinator of a program called 'Magdalene on the Inside' at the Tennessee Prison of Women. She leads courses on the effects of prostitution and trafficking, childhood sexual abuse therapy, twelve-step programs, healthy relationships, and communication.

During an interview at the Tennessee Prison for Women, an inmate named Kay expressed a specific need for programs that address a woman's past sexual abuse. Currently, no such

program exists at the prison. Kay had been abused and this left her feeling worthless, hopeless and in need of something to ease her pain.

Now this may finally be possible for her through the new program, Magdalene on the Inside.” Many times, God provides a way where is no way.

Becca said this recently: “On good Friday, we celebrate the crowning achievement of love. This is the day we learn again how to speak love in the midst of hate, tenderness in the face of fear, and compassion in the work of justice. A few nights ago, I heard three women survivors and graduates of Thistle Farms speak in front of the community of Brentwood Academy.

They stood there through tears as Kimberly said, “I don’t have a message for the women still on the streets. I am the message.”

Jesus is the message of new life, hope, and Love in the midst of fear and evil all around us.

The Presiding Bishop said in his Easter message: “

“The Right Reverend Barbara Harris was the first woman ordained and consecrated a bishop in The Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion. In her memoir, entitled Hallelujah, Anyhow! [she] quotes an old Gospel hymn that says it this way:

Hallelujah anyhow

Never let your troubles get you down

When your troubles come your way

Hold your hands up high and say

Hallelujah anyhow!

When I get to Heaven, I want to meet one person, and her name is Mary Magdalene.

Because if ever there was another Hallelujah, Anyhow sister, it was Mary Magdalene. And her life, and her example, tells us what it means to follow in the way of Jesus, in the Way of Love.

Mary Magdalene showed up when others would not. Mary Magdalene spoke up when others remained silent. Mary Magdalene stood up when others sat down.

John’s Gospel tells us that when many of the disciples fled and abandoned Jesus, Mary Magdalene stood by him at the cross. Hallelujah, Anyhow”.

Are we meant to do this alone? Definitely not! God never meant us to be put on the road of faith by ourselves. Jesus sent out the disciples to minister in pairs. He called at least 12 apostles.

We are called together in community. This is why I encourage us all coming together at the very least on Sundays. We need each other to be able to take our faith out into the world. It is safe here within these walls. It is not so safe out there. As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with our lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world. We go to become Beloved Community, a people reconciled in love with God and one another. What does to be **in community** mean?

Sister Chittister describes it this way:

“A spirituality of community requires meaningful contact, a common vision, and the beating of a cosmic heart big enough to embrace all of life. The important thing to remember about community is that it involves a great deal more than simply bringing a group of people together. To be in community means that you will be there for others and they will equally be there for you. You will not be alone either in your happiness or in sorrow. You will be with people in community who share common goals; who have a common vision for life. Who understands what it means to strive for those things with others of like mind and heart. “

We are part of the Community of Faith here at Christ Church, the Diocese of Michigan and the Episcopal Church. I have to say that I simply cannot understand how anyone is able to follow Jesus in today's world apart from Community. It takes more strength and perseverance than I have for sure. But thanks to Jesus and his sacrifice for us and to God who gave us the gift of the Resurrection, we never have to walk in this world alone. Together, we go out into the world, as Mary of Magdala did, walking the walk with Jesus, following him to the cross, and proclaiming the Resurrection to all those we meet. Alleluia! Christ is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!