

Messengers of Hope
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/20/25

The women did not go to the tomb on Sunday morning expecting to find it empty. Mary, Joanna, Mary and their fellow women disciples went with spices and ointments they had prepared, supplies for anointing a corpse. Really they should have anointed Jesus's body before it was buried on Friday, but perhaps they were too exhausted after a long day of watching him die.

For Luke tells us that these women were there at the cross. In fact, they have been with Jesus for some time now. Way back in chapter 8 of his gospel, Luke names this group of women as those who traveled with Jesus, along with "the twelve," as he went "through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." Luke tells us that Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and "many other" women provided for Jesus and their fellow followers "out of their own resources." They used their money and their status – at least in the case of Joanna, who Luke identifies as the wife of one of King Herod's administrators – these women used their money and their status to make sure that they and their fellow disciples, as well as their Lord Jesus, were well fed and well cared for.

These women came with Jesus from the region of Galilee in the north to the capital city of Jerusalem in the south, as Jesus set his face to go there and square off with both Jewish religious authorities and the Roman power structure. Luke tells us that the women watched as Jesus breathed his last on a Roman imperial cross, just outside Jerusalem's city walls. And after his death, they went to the donated tomb to inspect Jesus's body and see how it was laid. Then they went home and rested on the Sabbath day, Saturday, according to Biblical command and Jewish custom.

So on Sunday morning, these faithful women, these disciples and benefactors of Jesus, get up early and go in their grief to do what they, for whatever reason, did not do on Friday: anoint the corpse of their friend. Only when they get to the tomb there is no corpse. In fact, when they first arrive there is nothing there at all. No stone in front of the entrance to the tomb, no body. All they seem to have is their own perplexity.

Then suddenly two men in dazzling clothes are standing beside them. Luke does not identify the men as angels, perhaps because the women did not identify them that way, at least not at first. Upon seeing these strange figures, the women trade their confusion for terror and fall to the ground in fear. But the visitors offer them words of reassurance: "why do you look for the living among the dead?" In other words, why would you look for someone who is alive in a cemetery? You wouldn't. He's not here. Jesus has risen! Remember what he told you, that he would be handed over to die, be crucified, and on the third day rise again!

The reminder to remember what Jesus taught them sparks something in the women. The things that Jesus has told them about what would happen to him start to click into place, to make sense. Maybe only a little bit of sense, but a kind of sense nonetheless... yes, Jesus did tell them, multiple times, that he would die and rise again! They run to tell the eleven – what's left of the twelve named male disciples, minus Judas the betrayer – and all the rest who are gathered with them.

The women find their friends and pour out their story. But the story seems to the eleven an "idle tale." At least that's how our translation very politely puts it. The word translated "idle tale" is used only here in the entire New Testament, and it means something more like "BS" – literally the "ranting of a person suffering from delirium." The men think the women have lost it.

But Peter: Peter is at least curious enough to go and see for himself. Just as the words of the mysterious visitors in dazzling clothes stirred something in the women at the tomb, now the words of the women to the apostles have stirred something in Peter. Maybe, just maybe... Peter can't sit still and wonder anymore. He gets up and runs to the tomb. There he finds that the women have not, in fact, lost it. Instead, he too finds the tomb empty except for a pile of linen cloths that had been used to wrap the body of Jesus.

Peter's doubt has turned to awe – perhaps not quite understanding yet – but he returns home full of amazement. Later on, things will become more clear, such that he will be able to preach confidently the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection, from beginning to end, with a coherent narrative arc and a deep assurance of its connection to God's plans for humanity. But for now, he, like the women, is simply amazed at the possibility that life exists where they looked to find death.

If you came to church this morning with more doubt than faith, with more grief than hope, with more confusion than confidence, you are not alone: the disciples, both the men and the women, they are right there with you. That Sunday morning, they felt the weight of the world on their shoulders. Their Lord, the one who they believed would save their

people, save the world, was dead. The disciples struggled with the cruelty of an oppressive empire that valued power over the wellbeing of people, that would crucify an innocent man for preaching a gospel of love, a gospel of peace and freedom for all of God's creation. And they struggled with their family of faith, who chose appeasing that empire over the life of their friend, handing him over to be killed. I imagine it was a struggle for the women to get out of bed to go to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week.

And yet, when the women got out of bed to go to the tomb, to do the next right thing – they found not a dead body, but evidence of resurrected life. Though they did not yet see the picture whole, did not yet clearly understand what was happening, with a spark of hope they ran to tell their friends. And though it seemed like a bunch of BS to most, Peter caught the spark and ran to see for himself, then eventually came back to tell his hope to the group. And slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the good news of the empty tomb spread, from disciple to disciple, from apostles to crowds, from eyewitnesses to gospel writers, through generations and across continents and finally to us, on another Sunday morning in a time and place where hope can seem in short supply.

But if the tomb is empty, we do in fact have hope. If the tomb is empty, then Jesus is alive. If the tomb is empty, then the grave could not contain our Savior. If the tomb is empty, then the powers of hell are no match for the power of our God. If the tomb is empty, then the oppressive crush of empire is not stronger than God's plans to redeem God's creation. If the tomb is empty, then God's way of self-emptying service has triumphed over the world's ways of domination, coercion and violence. If the tomb is empty, then death does not have the final word. – If the tomb is empty, anything is possible, even redemption of what is most broken, even new life where we had looked to find death.

We come together this morning to hear this story again, to see if the tomb is in fact empty, to see if Jesus is alive. And somehow, despite all logic, despite all the voices in our head saying that's too crazy to be true, despite all the sin and pain and darkness in our lives and in the world, here we are at a tomb with nothing inside except the promises of God's salvation ringing in our ears. Jesus is alive, and hope is too. How can we, like the women, leave this place to become messengers of that hope, sharing the spark of good news with others?

This is going to sound funny, but until about a month ago, I forgot about spring. I grew up down the turnpike in Central Pennsylvania, but I spent the last seven years living in Austin, Texas. Spring doesn't really happen there in the same way it does here. It just goes from mostly warm to really warm. A lot of the trees are pin oaks, with leaves that stay green and on the trees most of the year. Sure, there are bluebonnets and other colorful wildflowers round about March, but the change of seasons is just not very pronounced.

So I sort of forgot about the glorious explosion of color that springtime brings here, not just on the ground but everywhere you look. Many days in the last month I have woken up feeling sad about the state of the world, stressed about the news, worried for friends and neighbors – and I leave my house with a heavy sigh. But then I get in the car and between my house and here, a journey of just a few miles, there is so much new life to behold, something new every day. Purple crocuses, yellow daffodils, pink cherry trees, vibrant forsythia, white magnolias, and now tulips in every color of the rainbow and dark red maples and that almost neon green of young leaves just emerging on trees. They are impossibly beautiful. And made all the more beautiful by the fact that I forgot to expect this utterly ordinary and simultaneously miraculous yearly pattern of unfolding.

These God-given gifts of beauty speak simple messages of hope to me each day. The world is hard and heavy but there is still so much to be thankful for. We may be tempted by despair but joy finds its way to us, surprises and delights us when we least expect it. Things often feel like they are falling apart, but new things are growing deep beneath the earth, just waiting to push their way out. Where we had looked to find death, we can find new life instead. Resurrection is possible.

And so on this Resurrection Sunday as we remember the report of the women on the first Resurrection Sunday, Christ invites us, like them, to be messengers of hope. We don't have to have it all figured out just yet. We don't have to pretend that things aren't dark and scary or that we fully understand what the empty tomb means for our lives. But we can pass on the good news of resurrection possibility, embodying the hope we have in Christ in the mundane and miraculous of our daily lives: being people of peace and goodwill, people who speak the truth in love, people who care for the sick and the suffering, people who choose compassion over cruelty, people who forgive as we have been forgiven, people whose lives make real the good news that in the realm of God, sin and death never have the final word.

To paraphrase John Green, the world may be broken, but hope is not a bunch of BS. Because the tomb is empty, hope is real. And it's contagious. So go and tell it – go and *be* it – and maybe someone else will be just crazy enough to run to the tomb and see for themselves.