

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
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Earlier this week, Mary Magdalene and a couple of other women saw Jesus die on a cross. They had hoped he was the Messiah, but earlier this week their hope turned to grief.

Earlier this week, an older couple received a phone call from their son, out West. He said that he and his wife were having some problems and wouldn't be able to come for the holidays. "By the way, the grandkids say hi." They tell him of course they understand. They hang up the phone but don't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office who tried to explain about downsizing. She cleans out her desk refusing to cry until she gets to the car. And then she drives home wondering what she will tell her kids. Earlier this week someone received bad test results from a physician. Someone else buried a cherished companion in life.

Earlier this week someone's hope was crucified. Maybe yours. If wasn't last Friday, then it was a previous dark day or a dark day to come. Sooner or later we all lose whatever it is we're counting on. According to the gospels, even Jesus will die on you. Or at least, the Jesus you know will die.

Mary Magdalene got up early this morning, before it was even light. But that isn't hard if you have just spent another sleepless night in grief. The nights are always hardest. "Best to keep moving," she tells herself. So, Mary heads to the tomb where the body of Jesus lay. The Gospel of John doesn't tell us why Mary went to the tomb. The other gospels claim it was to anoint the dead body of Jesus. Perhaps, it was also just easier to grieve in the cemetery. As she made her way down that dark road to the tomb, surely her mind must have drifted back to the better days they all had with Jesus in Galilee. Ah, Galilee. How far that seemed from this wretched place called Golgotha, the skull.

Back in the early days of Jesus' ministry in Galilee when he was popular, and when he had healed Mary Magdalene's tortured soul, she must have developed a few expectations of Jesus. I don't know what all those expectations were. I do know that she didn't expect to be coming to his tomb. Jesus was her Rabbi. Her teacher who explained God to her. Maybe she expected explanations to save her. But now, Rabbi Jesus was dead.

What about you? What have you expected of Jesus? Some of us, like Mary, also think of Jesus as a teacher. "If you just follow the Christian prescriptions," they say, "then you'll enjoy a good life." But what will you do the day an unexpected tragedy tears your good life apart and all the prescriptions don't help? Or maybe you think of Jesus as a healer, a rescuer. He certainly did heal many people according to the New Testament. Maybe you or someone you love did experience a healing at some point that you would describe as miraculous. But it is only a matter of time before one of your prayers for healing is not answered the way you want. And what then?

Others of us prefer to think of Jesus in terms of a personal relationship. "It isn't just his teaching or healing," we say, "it's his love that saves my life and I love him too." But Jesus will keep trying to tell you loving him means loving your neighbor, loving even your enemy, and that loving Jesus will lead to places you'd rather not go.

Still others of us expect only to get social and political ideology from Jesus. Sometimes it's the progressive liberals who baptize their social programs with Jesus' endorsement. Lately some who are politically conservative claim to have the copywrite on Jesus' name. Interestingly, it was the conservative Pharisees and liberal Sadducees who worked together in bilateral cooperation to kill Jesus when they realized he could not be captured by their competing agendas and was, in fact, a threat to both of them.

Here's the point: Like Mary we all have a perspective on Jesus Christ, which provides the gospel truth as we

know it. Your gospel is the story upon which you are building your life as a follower of Christ. That gospel may be all about learning from Jesus, or finding healing from him, or loving him, or legitimating a political agenda from him. But we all have a story when it comes to Jesus, and that story is the source of our hope. But what will you do when that hope falls apart and your gospel story starts to unravel? What will you do when the Jesus that you know comes to Good Friday?

Most of us will do the same thing Mary Magdalene did. We'll just stay by the tomb. I am amazed by the durability of our expectations of Jesus. It doesn't matter how much of a beating they take they tenaciously hang onto our souls. If you think Jesus is going to protect you from harm, then you will just keep waiting for Superman to save the day no matter how many times you get clobbered. If you think Jesus isn't going to do a thing for you, then it doesn't matter how many blessings he rains down upon you, you'll still complain. And if you think Jesus is going to give you your dreams, then you will insist on waiting for them, even when he keeps trying to give you the dreams of God. Even when the Jesus we know is dead, like Mary, we remain doggedly devoted, living out of a story that isn't working.

But what if, one day, Easter broke through to you, and you discovered that there is more to Jesus and the Gospel than you know?

After Mary arrived at the tomb of Jesus, she found to her dismay that it was empty. She ran to tell Peter and John. They ran to the tomb to see for themselves. After that, the men just go home and leave her alone. Then Mary Magdalene starts to cry. She looks inside to see two angels who ask her why she is weeping. According to John, either she doesn't recognize them as angels, or she isn't impressed if she does. When they ask her why she is weeping, she just wants to talk about Jesus' dead body that isn't where it is supposed to be.

Then the risen Savior comes up behind her and also asks, "Woman why are you weeping?" Mary turns to see him but doesn't recognize him because she is too focused on her grief over her dead Rabbi, whose body is missing. Supposing that this man is the cemetery gardener she says, "They have taken him away. Do you know where he is? Tell me and I will take him back." Jesus just says "Mary." Then, the text says she turned, which is striking because she was already looking at him. Perhaps it means that she turned away from what was gone and turned toward this risen hope who knew her by name.

Do you see? The risen Savior knows your name. And Easter proclaims he is intent on revealing more of his salvation in your life. But the discovery of this is so personal. It is not enough to know that Easter is our hope, or the world's hope. Change comes from seeing that this hope has your name on it as well.

Mary exclaims, "Rabbi." And she reaches for Jesus. Now what happens next takes me by surprise. I was expecting a big teary embrace here. And then Jesus would say, "Gather up the old gang. We're heading back home to Galilee." But instead, when Mary reached for Jesus, he told her "Don't cling to me."

"Don't cling to me?" Why does Jesus say that? Because it is what Easter says. Easter claims whatever it is that you are thinking about Jesus, it is not enough. He is not just your old Rabbi. He is not just your ticket to heaven, your work ethic, or your moral code. He is not just your politics or your views on social justice. And he is not just your consolation, or your hope for your family, or getting what you want. Don't cling to that.

Every expectation of Jesus eventually places him back in a tomb. And Jesus will not stay in a tomb! He is the Resurrection and the Life. That cannot be managed. You cannot hold onto Jesus. You can only watch the surprising ways he grabs hold of you.

After he has defeated death, it should be clear that there is always more to the Savior than we know. And isn't

that really all the hope we need? Amen.