

John 20:11-18 Jesus in the Present Tense

Prayer for Illumination: God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to the presence of Christ even now and helps us acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that your Spirit now would give us insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation of the Easter gospel. Amen.

Some years Easter hope looks a lot like this [show image: dresses, candies, brass, choir] Other years Easter hope feels so small. I remember the first year when, as a teenager, Easter didn't really feel like Easter anymore, at least not the Easter of my childhood. As a young kid we'd get dressed up, like many sisters of the 90s, my sister and I would often have matching Easter dresses with poofy sleeves and frilly socks. I know some of you know exactly what I'm talking about – you can feel your ankles itching at the mention of them. But that year when Easter hope felt small for the first time I didn't really dress up. No special dress. No frilly socks. Certainly no Easter hat. The Easter candy from my Grandma Hochhalter didn't come in the mail that year anymore because she had passed away. There would be a white Easter lily at the front of the church donated by my parents in her name that year. And that year I was scheduled to be in the nursery, so I missed the brass instruments, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," and our church's annual tradition of singing the Hallelujah Chorus. This was major bummer since I had finally learned it in high school choir and would have been able to join the church choir that morning. Instead I peeked my head out of the nursery where I could just barely see the alto section.

Some years Easter hope feels so small, and it feels so fleeting. Fleeting, like a false start to spring, like new shoots of green getting covered with snow. The hope of reprieve from death and suffering and the hope of a changed world order soon gives way to another mundane week of work, another week of school, of staring at screens and sending emails, of working outside in the cold and the wind, taking care of teething babies or children testing the limits of their independence and their parents' patience. And it may not be the suffering that's getting to us, just the boredom and mundane life. It's the boredom of a whole year without family reunions, the boredom of a year without Stratford plays and symphony concerts, the boredom of a year with no cheering crowds at hockey or baseball games, a year without lining up in the sanctuary to ooh and ahh over the newest baptized babies in this church. It's the boredom of a whole year of muted celebrations and mostly empty spaces. Easter hope can feel so fleeting, like one sunny and warm day before the wind and rain pick up again. It's one day of singing and eating and resting before heading back into the third provincial lockdown. And we wonder if maybe we need to go check the tomb once more to make sure it is really empty, make sure everything really has changed, make sure Jesus isn't still laying down on the job.

It's these years when Easter hope feels small and fleeting when it is a good thing to read John's account of the resurrection of Jesus. Of all the gospel accounts of the resurrection, his is by far the most muted, the most toned down. This week my husband joked that it's like John really could have benefitted from seeing *Avenger's: End Game* to learn about how you're supposed to show the cosmic battle between good and evil, between life and death. Matthew's account hits some of those right notes with the earthquake, the angel of the Lord coming down from heaven and the guards so afraid that they "shook and became like dead men" (Mt. 28:4). Mark writes about the women leaving the tomb trembling and bewildered! The gospel writer, Luke, writes that when the women were in the tomb looking for the body, "Suddenly, two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground" (Lk 24:5). These writers get it – there's drama, action, and flashy costumes in their stories. John basically has none of that. No earthquake, no trembling in fear, no stone being dramatically rolled to the side with super-human strength, no dazzling costumes.

John does not draw us in with flash and drama, he's more subtle than that. What John draws us in with is grammar. John, much more than the other gospel writers, uses what is called the historic present tense. This is when a writer is talking about something that happened in the past – but they're narrating it with present tense verbs as if it is happening right in front of you. Our English translations don't really pick up on this subtlety in John. In John's gospel, the grammar is putting us right in the action – it is happening around us. John's gospel gives us Easter in the present tense.

As the story unfolds around us we see that in the gospel of John, hope does not begin with an earthquake and a light show, it begins with a woman in grief – a woman desperate to find the body of her friend, Jesus, to protect his body from being desecrated or worse. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene brings the other disciples to the tomb, not because an angel had told her what happened, but because she is now experiencing grief upon grief of death, and now a missing body. The other disciples investigate and soon abandon Mary at the tomb without a word. She stands outside the tomb crying. Crying because she cannot find the body of her friend, her Lord.

As she weeps, she bends over to look inside the tomb – something of a cave - and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been laid on a stone shelf, where his body had been laid to decompose, one where his head should have been, the other where his feet were supposed to be. In the gospel of John hope does not begin with a startle from the angels –

in John's gospel there are no flashy costumes, no swooping angels from heaven, they're just described as dressed in white. The angels didn't dress up for Easter this year. And they're just sitting there.

Much has been made of this imagery throughout the centuries. Suggestions are that John is trying to evoke the image of the mercy seat from the ark of the covenant. There were two angel statues on the front and back of it. This was the place where the high priest would offer the blood of the atonement sacrifice once a year on the Day of Atonement. John's gospel is full of symbols and stuff, so there's probably some merit to this imagery. It could be representing the mercy seat and Jesus would be the atoning sacrifice that was offered to God at this place. But what strikes me so clearly this year is just how ordinary and unflashy John's description is compared to the other gospel writers. And even more distinct is that Mary is very much unbothered, unshocked, unafraid of them. How many times in the Bible is the first thing out of an angel's mouth is "Do not be afraid"? Remember all those instances from the Advent and Christmas stories? Come on, John, where's the drama? Where's the fear? In the Gospel of John, hope does not begin with a startle. It begins with a woman right there in front of us in the present tense, so familiar in her grief.

History has not always been kind to Mary in this story, to those who weep on Easter. For example, John Calvin goes out of his way to ensure that we do not think too highly of her devotion to Jesus as she stays behind at the tomb. He writes, "There is no great cause for praise that the wom[a]n remained at the tomb when the disciples [Peter and the beloved disciple] returned to the city. For the disciples took with them comfort and joy, but the wom[a]n [was] filled with idle and useless weeping. In short, only a mixture of superstition and carnal feeling keeps [her] at the tomb" (2:196). History is not always kind to people who weep on Easter, to people who feel like hope is small or fleeting on Easter.

But in John's gospel, this is where hope begins, in weeping, in confusion, in wanting more than anything else, to just be near to Jesus. In John's gospel, hope is not announced with trumpets or earthquakes or flashy costumes. Easter hope grows in much more ordinary ways. It begins in weeping, then not in accusation and belittling like Calvin is inclined, but in a tender question. "Woman, why are you crying?" "They've taken away my Lord. I don't know where they've put him." Mary turns from the tomb and sees Jesus, John tells us. Only she doesn't realize it's Jesus because unlike a lot of art and illustrations, he does not come to her as a glowing ghost, gliding through the air. He comes looking more like a gardener. Frederik Beuchner imagines this gardener in the present tense with the red marks on his hands looking like a gardeners' hands that have handled too many roses without wearing leather gloves, and his feet scarred from miles of patrolling the gravel walkways to pick up gum wrappers with a

pointed stick. Another tender question, this time from the gardener, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, tell me where you’ve put him, and I will get him.”

Easter hope begins in weeping, in confusion, in tender questions, in wanting more than anything to be near to Jesus. It unfolds in what Dale Bruner has called Jesus’ shortest sermon and his most dramatic, “Mary,” he says. Funny that his most dramatic sermon is something so simple, so ordinary as her name. But of course, we’ve been primed for this moment. “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (Jn10:3). I AM the gate, I AM the good shepherd. “I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (Jn 10:14). The same one who is the gate and the good shepherd, the same one who is the resurrection and the life who raised Lazarus from the dead, the one who is the true vine comes to her looking like one who tends the vines.

Hope begins in weeping, in tender questions asked by angels who forgot to dress up, in the garb of a gardener, in the ordinariness of a name, and it unfolds again in a hug. “My rabbi,” she cries as all of her hopes and fears collapse into a hug with her shepherd, her teacher, her Lord. The embrace is made evident by the words of Jesus, not the narrator’s description, when Jesus tells Mary, “Do not cling to me” or “Let go of me” – not as some older versions have it, “Do not touch me” (KJV). The verb is telling her to stop doing something that she’s already doing. There has been much ink spilled over the question of whether or not Mary and Jesus *actually* hugged – if she was indeed permitted to hug Jesus in his resurrected state or if she had to give up their former natural relation to Jesus and adapt to some supernatural, ethereal, spiritual relation.

I think it’s worth pausing on this point. All through the Gospel of John, Jesus has been revealing who he is in these I AM statements – he teaches who he is through things that his disciples could reach out and touch or at least see with their eyes – bread, light, gate, shepherd, a brother brought back to life, a road map, a vine. I AM – the perpetual present tense. The significance of the bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ for these statements is that they remain in the present tense. Without the resurrection, we would read all of these as something that was true only in the past – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead means that all of these I AM statements are still true for us in the present tense. He is not an ethereal ghost – he is still who he was, more solid, not less; more fully one with humanity, not less human, not less touchable.

As the scene unfolds around us I think we do see Mary collapsing into a hug with the same Jesus whom she has known, whom she has walked with, and eaten with, and sat with.

Dale Bruner explains, for Mary, “Jesus is not an untouchable ghost; he is a real and affectionate human being, completely raised back into true physical and living humanity and not just into ethereal spirituality....Jesus [lets] Mary Magdalene embrace him for a period of time. But now there are important missions to be done, and so Jesus asks her, please, let him go for a minute; he has something important to tell her” (Bruner, 1153).

Easter hope begins in weeping, in caring questions, in someone who looked like a gardener tending the vines. It grows in the ordinariness of a shepherd calling the sheep by name, in a hug between friends who have journeyed on the way together. And Easter hope finally explodes in testimony. “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary goes back to the disciples, not with an explanation of the resurrection, not with the creedal statements that would be developed later, “I believe in the resurrection of the body,” but with a simple testimony of where Jesus met her, “I have seen the Lord.” The risen Jesus reorients her joy from reunion to proclamation. Easter hope explodes with an invitation to testify to what you are seeing, “I have seen the Lord.” The explanation of what Jesus told her comes second. I have seen the Lord.

Some years Easter hope feels so small and fleeting. These are the years when it is a gift to read the Gospel of John’s account of the resurrection, when hope grows in very ordinary ways, when Jesus comes to Mary in ways that we still know still know him today. Looking like everyday people, calling us each by name, in hugs – even if they are few and far between these days – and finally exploding in testimony of all the ways that we have seen the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate and the shepherd who lays down his life, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, the vine who makes him home among us even as we make our homes among him. Hope erupts in all the ways that we testify to seeing Jesus in the present tense.

Pastor and poet, J. Shepherd Barrie leaves us with a picture of Easter hope when he writes:

Our Christian symbols seem, at times, not quite
 appropriate to the meaning they bear.
 For instance, take the Easter lily, white
 and fragile sign of resurrection. Rare,
 its graceful silent trumpet greets the light
 of March or April only under the glare
 of florists’ lamps, unnaturally bright.
 You never find them in the open air

before July. A better flower for Easter Day
 would be, as every angry gardener knows,
 the dandelion, seeded by the gay
 abandoned wind that, as it listeth blows.
 No matter how we weed out every stray,
 digging as deep, the roots still deeper goes.
 And when, at last, we quit and go away
 the rain falls, and a host of fresh bright foes
 stands resurrected, and the garden glows. (“Hope Weed” in *Whatever Happened to
 Delight*, 92).

Easter hope seems so small and fleeting at times. Small as a single dandelion that can be mowed down or dug up. But not so easily killed.

When I was your interim pastor back in 2018 Pastor Carel and I were riding in Pastor John’s car early in June. We were on our way to lunch, I think. It was a warm and sunny day. We were driving down the road and on our left-hand side there was an open field. This field was covered from corner to corner with these bright yellow weeds. Pastor John stopped the conversation and got that big smile on his face as we drove past the field blanketed in dandelions, “Wow,” he said, “that’s beautiful.” The God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead raises hope in us in these small and seemingly ordinary ways, in grief, in calling us by name, in hugs. So that now instead of seeing a small and fleeting flower of hope we would see a blanket of hearty and persistent hope weeds, all testifying to the resurrection and to the enduring I AM – the risen Jesus with us even now by the power of Spirit of God who raised him from the dead. So we testify with Mary, “I have seen the Lord,” and with Pastor John, “Wow, that’s beautiful.” Thanks be to God.

God of Life, in Jesus Christ, death has been swallowed up in victory. You raised Jesus Christ, the firstfruits from the dead – even as death came through a human being now life has come to us through your son. Thank you for this gift, thank you for this life, for this hope of glory. Open our eyes to see the glory of the risen Christ in and among us, and then open our mouths to declare your praise, to testify to your grace, to testify to life. We pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.