

Sermon

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

St. John the Evangelist

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018

Easter (B) {7:30am & 11am}

John Newton was born in London in 1725. His childhood was, by many measures, disastrous. His mother died by the time he was seven. By eleven he had left school to go to sea with his shipmaster father and by 18 he was pressed into duty in the Navy. His service was disgraceful. He was caught trying to desert and received a brutal punishment and stripping of rank, at which point he went to work on a slave ship bound for West Africa. But even on this ignominious vessel he ran afoul of the crew and they were so fed up with him that in 1745, they left him on the coast of West Africa where he was made a servant to a notoriously abusive slave trader and his wife. After three years he was rescued, but on the way back home the ship encountered a severe storm off the coast of Ireland and sprang a leak, and Newton wondered whether this would finally be the end of his nasty, brutish and short life. He was unmoored. He was lost in every sense of the word.

Mary Magdalene might as well have been on that boat getting swamped out at sea, this morning. She's lost, alone, afraid, full of despair. She too has come unmoored. The death of her friend, mentor, teacher, and Lord has left her disoriented. In just a few short hours she lost the one thing she was sure of, the one person she was sure of and she could not see what the future would be, let alone if there even would be a future. She was spiraling. The only thing she has left, the only thing she has to keep her afloat in the tumultuous sea of grief is his tomb. It's the only stable thing she has to hold on to. So while it is still dark, while she is still *in* the dark, she heads there, just so she could be near him. She's grasping for something, anything that can help keep her head above water.

We know moments when it feels as if relentless waves are crashing over us. When we've lost our bearings and there is no future in sight. When we have been knocked off course and our hopes, our plans, our dreams have capsized. It's that feeling of dizziness after you've lost a friend or partner or parent that you've loved for years. Or when, midcareer, you lose your job and your whole life gets flipped upside down. Or when you get a phone call from your doctor saying, "Could you come in? We need to talk." And your mind goes blank with panic. We know what it is to be disoriented. We know what it is to be lost.

When Mary arrives at the tomb she gets just what she *doesn't* need—another shock to the system. Instead of a nice quiet grave, she finds the stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. And now she really loses it. This is not good news yet. This is even worse news. She runs to get Peter and John but they're no help. And she stands there, falling apart, because she has lost even the one thing she had to hold on to and now she's drowning. Drowning in her tears and in her grief for he is gone and she does not know where they have laid him.

And in the midst of that pain, that despair Jesus appears. "Why are you weeping?" Jesus asks her. "Just tell me where he is," she screams; desperate, alone, afraid. "Mary..." Jesus says to her. And like a crack of lightning that illuminates the stormiest of nights her grief is lifted and she sees her teacher, her Lord, her savior.

On that stormy night off the coast of Ireland, Jesus also came to John Newton, as he was sinking into the depths. Newton had lost all religious concern during his nomadic youth but now, in the midst of stormy seas, he found himself aware of a deep spiritual longing within him. Despite having no strong ties to anyone and nothing really to look forward to, as the ship filled with water he called out to God in desperation. And the story goes that

the cargo of the ship shifted and plugged the hole so they were able to make it safely to shore. Newton marked that night as the night he became a Christian.

My friends, the Resurrection has two messages of hope for us this morning. One is the message that death is not the end; God will claim us even in the grave and raise us to new and eternal life once we have shuffled off this mortal coil. Jesus Christ is risen today, so we too will rise in glory. *Alleluia.*

But there's a second bit of good news in the garden outside the empty tomb. And it is that not only is there life after death, there is life after loss too. When you find life has knocked you off course and you are disoriented and the waves are crashing over the side of the boat; when you have lost someone you love or lost your way or lost your job; when old ways and plans have died and new ones are nowhere in sight, when you are sitting in darkness, the risen Christ comes to you and lifts you out of the depths, to safety. He is your life preserver. He is your hope. Resurrection, my friends, is to be found not just in the hereafter, but in the *here and now*.

And finding resurrection in the here and now, means not just that Jesus comforts us in the darkness, it means that from that darkness we are reborn to a future full of possibility and purpose. Both John Newton and Mary experienced this. While Mary is clinging to Jesus outside the tomb he says something unexpected to her, he says, "Do not hold on to me," Mary. When you're drowning the impulse is to grab on to the closest thing just to be safe. But soon you realize that just because you're okay doesn't mean you're home. Just because you're alive doesn't mean you're living. When Jesus says do not hold on to me, he is telling Mary that not only will his life go on, but her life will go on too. "I'm not quite home yet," he says, "and neither are you. There's more work to do. So go, gather the crew and go on. There is more yet to come." To experience resurrection in our lives means more than just turning to Jesus in times of trial. It means living into the future of goodness and glory that God has in store for you. Resurrection is not just a comfort, it is a calling. Follow me, Jesus promises, and I'll lead you there.

Despite his conversion to Christianity, John Newton continued to work in the slave trade even becoming a captain of slave ships. Although he had found Jesus, he wasn't home yet. He had a lot of work to do to reach the life of goodness and glory that Jesus was calling him to. Only after a number of years and after deepening his relationship with Christ did he leave that wretched profession. Eventually he was ordained as an Anglican priest and became very active in the English abolitionist movement, renouncing and confessing the sins of his past, but it took a while.

It will take a while for us too. It will take a while for us to become the people the risen Christ is calling us to be. To say our lives are full of moments of resurrection means they will also be full of death and loss. And whether it is a literal loss or a metaphorical one, when we lose someone, or something we run the risk of being swamped by the emotional storms that come. The good news this morning is that neither death nor loss is the end of our story. Having passed from death to life, having passed through the darkest, stormiest of times, Jesus promises to be with us through ours. Not only comforting us in those moments, but leading us forward into new and greater life. A life of love and beauty; a life of purpose and peace. This is the message for Mary in the garden. And it was the message to John Newton who after many years and many, *many* struggles authored what may be the most famous hymn in Christendom: *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

Dear friends, may the risen Christ anchor you against life's stormy seas, and fill you with hope, fill you with purpose, fill you with love. And until it is time for this existence to give way to a larger and more marvelous one in God's heavenly company, may your life shine with the radiance of resurrection. Happy Easter and Amen.