

Easter Vigil Sermon 2024
The Rev. Dr. Pamela Dolan
Text: Mark 16:1-8

Does it feel like something's missing?

That's usually my first response to the Gospel reading we have tonight, Mark's story of the women and the Empty Tomb. We've just had all this glorious buildup of stories and songs, of darkness turning to light, of finally ending our 40-day fast and being able to shout out the word, "Alleluia"—and then what? While we know that the Resurrection of Jesus must have been an paradigm-shifting, mind-boggling, earth-shattering event, we have almost no hint of that in tonight's brief Gospel.

What we have is three traumatized women who are struggling to make sense of a world that seems to have gone mad. These are women who loved Jesus, who followed Jesus, who believed in his message of love and reconciliation, and they have just witnessed his brutal murder at the hands of the state. Their own religious leaders colluded with the forces of Empire and domination to kill an innocent man. Their own friends and loved ones, the men who had seemed like the closest followers of Jesus, betrayed and abandoned him. At this moment of unspeakable loss and terror, these women have nothing left but one another, and the aching, echoing grief that binds them together.

When the state-sponsored violence spins out of control, when neighborhoods become war zones, when the bombs are dropping and bullets are flying and there is no safe place to hide, it is most often the women who are left to hold the broken shards of a nation, of a society, of a family. I saw that in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and it's a reality that has been repeated throughout history.

It was three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—who started the Black Lives Matter movement, because they could not stand the death of another innocent black child at the hands of police.

It was women, especially Black and Brown women, who led the movement to resist police brutality in Ferguson and in all our communities. It was women, especially Black and Brown women, who organized rallies and marches against white supremacy, and it was also women who kept their cars stocked with bottles of water and milk of magnesia to counteract the dangerous burning of tear gas as it tore through the eyes of those who dared to protest peacefully in public spaces, who dared to say out loud that their lives had value.

Tonight, in Gaza and in other war-torn regions around the globe, still there are women holding the dying and the dead in their arms, unable to stop the waves of violence that keep crashing over their families and homes, in what must feel like an endless and unendurable assault on their very humanity.

So I am sure that the three women who got up very early to tend to the body of their beloved on that dark morning so long ago were not the first to courageously offer tenderness and holy practicality in the face of violence and oppression. Nor would they be the last.

If it seems like something is missing from this story because we don't get to see the flash and spectacle of a human being rising from the dead, perhaps we need to look more closely at what **is** there, what we **do** have in this story. We have these three women, Jewish Palestinian women, who go on in spite of all that they have lost. We have a testament to the human spirit, a reminder to men and women and people everywhere that sometimes you step forward in love

even when faith and hope seem to have fled. You keep going, even when you don't know how you will do it, even when there doesn't seem to be any way you can roll away the stone of despair that is blocking your path.

And we have a risen Christ, whose very absence at this moment is the greatest sign of his love. Jesus is not there at that tomb *because he is going ahead of them*. Jesus goes into the very depths of hell and in so doing breaks the bonds of sin and death forever. Jesus goes ahead to prepare a place for us. Jesus goes ahead so that we will never have to face our terror and anguish alone, ever again.

Whatever terrible things life throws at us, we will never be left entirely to our own devices. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, surrounded by barbed wire and with broken glass underfoot, we will find Jesus there ahead of us. Jesus will have been there first and Jesus will stay with us through it all. If it feels like something is missing because we don't get fireworks, or rainbows and unicorns and chocolate rabbits, then we have set our sights too low. What the Easter story offers us is new life in Christ, new and unending life, life everlasting. The tomb is empty because the body of Christ is being transformed into something that no earthly space can contain. God has already rolled away the stone and is waiting for us to follow, waiting for us to keep showing up for one another, waiting for us to be witnesses to the Resurrection for all who come after us. The only thing missing is us! Now is the time, now is the appointed hour. Let us walk in newness of life, together. Amen.