

Chuck Blaisdell
First Christian Church
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“A Love That Will Not Die”¹

Mark 15:46-16:8 After Jesus had died, Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down his body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Yet later, all they had been commanded they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward, Jesus himself sent out through them, from the east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of God's undying love for all.

Can you see the scene which Mark describes of that first Easter morning? Do you see the three women standing there? Do you know their story? How their beloved friend, their teacher, their rabbi Jesus has died – died a horrible death at the hands of an evil governor after long hours of suffering late on a Friday afternoon. Now, for faithful Jews like Jesus, like these women, sunset on Friday begins the Sabbath. Sacred time. And Jewish teaching does not allow for the preparation of a body for burial on Sabbath. So Jesus' friend Joseph of Arimathea borrowed a tomb, a cave,

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really, hewn out of the rock in the local cemetery. And there, as the sun slipped from the Friday sky, they lovingly laid that precious body until they can prepare it for its final burial.

But now Sabbath – which ends at Saturday’s sunset – is over. It is early the next morning and the women have come, their baskets filled with the ointments and the spices and the rags they will need for the task, a task they saw as a final act of love – to wash it and dress that broken body with dignity in preparation for its final resting place. Every culture has its own rituals around grief and death. You might find the ritual described in today’s scripture unsettling. And just because it was their ritual, it need not be ours. But we all need **some** ritual at such a time, don’t we? Something to do with our hands and our minds when our hearts are filled with grief and with the helplessness that comes with death. That is what is going on here on this first Easter morning – some friends have gathered to do what they can in the face of their world gone crazy, a world turned upside down, a world where violence and terror can change life irrevocably. We ourselves too often know such a world too, and so we understand that their ritual is important and necessary as they share their grief and share their tears and share the task of preparing their friend for burial.

Have you ever known such a morning? I suspect you have. And don’t you imagine that at least in some part of their souls these faithful women have to be asking “*Why, God, why?*” Why? Why did he have to die and so young and with so much left to offer? Why? God, why? They may be asking as if God is the one who killed him, even though, no, it was a vicious representative of Roman Empire who sent him to his death. But when we are in grief, or when we are afraid, or when we despair, we turn to

God with all those emotions, even with our anger at Him. And God receives them without judgment. God can hear all your prayers – even the angry, doubting ones. And God does not respond in kind. God instead knows your angry prayers and your doubting prayers are a sign of how much you care and how deeply you hurt. And God responds with love and hope and new possibility.

It is what God does that first Easter morning. Three women have gathered, huddled together in grief, having walked in the cold morning mist to the cemetery, expecting to find death. They are there to do what they can do in the face of so much over which they have no control. And I suspect that they may even think that what they are there to do doesn't seem like much, it certainly doesn't seem like enough. But they are here to do what they can, to do what they can. I know you know how this works, this doing what you can even if it doesn't seem enough. Whenever one of our children was sick, I couldn't magically fix it, make it all better. But I could put a cool rag on a forehead or rock them or rub some foul-smelling concoction on their chests which they hated. They probably would have gotten better just as fast without these things, particularly the foul-smelling stuff on their chests. But they were rituals in the face of my helplessness. When friends are in deep grief over a loss too big, we cannot do a thing to bring their beloved one back to life, but we can bake a casserole or make a chocolate pie. My wife, Barbara, has in fact developed a theory – that there is a secret church recipe book for levels of suffering. Chocolate chip cookies, she says, are for awaiting test results. Tuna noodle casserole means someone has died. And even though it's in that secret suffering cookbook, she says that she could never bring herself to offer Jello with bits of celery, and marshmallows, and nuts in it, because she can't

think of any suffering bad enough to deserve that. Cooking as ministry, cooking as ritual: something to do with our hands when our hearts feel so helpless.

That is what these women were about that first Easter morning, to do what they could do. And yet in their mindless doing, in their automatic ritual responses to their helplessness and grief, they could see no way forward. They did not see a future. They weren't even sure how they were going to remove the stone that Joseph had used the Friday evening before to protect the body in its resting place. But it did not matter. For all the while, all during their ritual gathering of spices and ointment and rags and water, in all the walking and the weeping, while they were doing what they could do, God was doing what God could do. God was rolling away the stone.

Do you know, the most miraculous part of the Easter story is not really about a bodily resuscitation. No, the most miraculous thing about the Easter story is the refusal of Jesus Christ to return hatred for hatred, fear for fear. Think about it: if Jesus' body had merely been resuscitated and he came back really ticked-off, out for revenge, out for payback – that would not have been good news. It maybe would have been an Arnold Schwarzenegger or Bruce Willis plot. But it wouldn't have been the Good News. In fact, too many people are afraid of God precisely because they've expected such a plot and such a God – a God out for revenge, ready to rescue all the ones we like and then go blasting away at all the ones we don't. But God doesn't do revenge, at least not the God of the cross, not the God of the parables, the God that Jesus calls "Abba," a word which literally translates as "Daddy." No, what this God does is love. The great good news is that love refused to die on Easter, and therefore hope could be born anew. Jesus Christ came into the world and offered to the world a vision of universal

love. Love no matter what. Love for you and me on the days when we deserve that love and on the days that we don't. Love for everybody we love and a bunch of people we don't love. Christ offered that kind of love. And the world too often responded with fear and violence as it still is too wont to do.

But Jesus Christ will not let us kill his love for us. And so hear this, my friends: There is no despair you feel, no mistake you have made, no shame you carry that will ever kill Jesus's love for you. He will not let it die. And each and every day, he is working, patiently working amidst the real powers of evil and death that do operate in this world, patiently working for your good and for the good of all the world. Oh, he hasn't conquered all the evil yet. Not yet. But while you and I are weeping, or when our hands are mindlessly doing whatever we can do to make it better, even when what we do seems pointless, so little in the face of so much, even when we cannot see how we will get beyond the huge, impenetrable stone before us, God is working to roll our stones away.

In fact, God has already done so. Have you seen it? Did you hear the closing verse of our scripture? I don't know whether your Bible includes this verse – only some of the oldest manuscripts do and some translations leave it out. But what those manuscripts say is this: *Jesus himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of God's undying love for all.* "For all." For all. Do you hear the wondrous good news in those two words? God's undying love is for you and me when we are at our worst, convinced that there is nothing loveable about us. God's undying love is for those who live their lives in fear of Him because they don't know what we know about grace and goodness – and doesn't that make you want to

tell them!?! God's undying love is for those who are who are mindlessly moving through hurt and pain and grief with the good and gentle news that it will get better and you will never be abandoned. God's undying love is for all, for all, for all. For Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen indeed. Alleluia! Alleluia!