

## Do You Have Your Key Ready?

Colossians 3:1-4 & John 20:1-18

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Colossians 3:1-4 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

### John 20:1-18 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

<sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes, <sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

<sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

### Do You Have Your Key Ready?

Around the turn of the twentieth century there lived a man named Reuben John Smith. Smith was fond of the comforts of life. Since he had lived a comfortable existence in this world, he thought it only proper to be prepared for a comfortable existence in the next world as well. So at his death he left detailed instructions concerning his burial.

He was to be buried in a new recliner chair upholstered in russet leather, and he was to be interred in a sitting position. On his lap was to be placed a checkerboard.

A practical man, Smith also ordered that he be dressed in a hat and coat, and that a key to the tomb be placed in his coat pocket. That was an interesting final touch, don't you think? — a key to the tomb. As far as is known, the key was never used. I wonder why?

At the death of Nikita Khrushchev, a former leader of the Soviet Union, a humorous story circulated in political circles. The Communist party that had cast Mr. Khrushchev aside was uncomfortable with the idea of burying his body on Soviet soil.

They first called the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, and asked if the U.S. would take Khrushchev's corpse. Nixon had his own problems at the time and declined.

Then the Soviet leaders tried Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel. Mrs. Meir was agreeable, but she added a note of caution. “I must warn you,” she said, “that this country has the world's highest resurrection rate.”

Well, she was right — Israel does have the world's highest resurrection rate. In case you're curious — the world's highest resurrection rate is one person, Jesus of Nazareth. And that is why we are here today.

The time was Sunday morning just before dawn. The setting — a garden not too far from the place where Jesus had been cruelly crucified. In the garden was a tomb — freshly hewn from rock. A giant stone once sealed the sepulcher, but that morning it had been rolled aside.

Some grief-stricken women made their way to that lonely spot. Of these women John's Gospel identifies only Mary Magdalene. Among the names included in the other Gospels are Mary, the mother of James, Joanna and Salome. Undoubtedly the silence of the night, and the solemnness of the occasion, caused them to move quietly toward the place where their Lord's body had lain. They brought spices with which to anoint His dead body.

It must have been disconcerting, Luke says frightening, to discover the stone already rolled away from the tomb and the tomb empty. Jesus was not there! What did it mean? Had His final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Did His enemies fear and despise Him so much that they had seized His broken body?

The women quickly scattered to tell their families and friends of this disturbing event. Mary rushed to inform Peter and John. They hurried back to the tomb with her, but they were as mystified as she. Then they returned to the safety and seclusion of their homes. That left Mary alone now with her grief.

In vain desperation she stooped and allowed herself one last look inside the burial vault. Imagine her surprise when she saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" Mary answered the only way she could. "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put Him."

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking He was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." Hearing her name spoken changed Mary's life forever! She turned toward the one who was speaking to her and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Whether the sun was just beginning to peep sleepily over some nearby Judean hillside at this precise moment we do not know. Tear-swollen eyes combined with pre-dawn darkness could explain Mary's failure to recognize Jesus immediately.

Undoubtedly, however, when He called her name, there was a sunrise in Mary's heart. "Rabboni!" she cried. With a sudden surge of emotion she sought to embrace Him. It was the natural response of deep and grateful love. It was Jesus who had made a new woman out of Mary Magdalene.

Tradition has painted her to be a woman of the streets. Whether this is so is a matter of speculation. What is not a matter of speculation was Mary's devotion to this humble Jewish rabbi! Impulsively she reached for Him. Jesus stopped her, however, with the explanation that He had not yet ascended to the Father. At this point Mary Magdalene would have to be content

to hold Him in her heart. That is exactly what she did. Later she would testify to His disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

What does Mary Magdalene’s experience on that first Easter Sunday have to do with your life and mine? Are there tombs in our lives into which we may be peering with a sense of helplessness and despair? Finally, is there a sense in which each of us can also come through a crisis of doubt and uncertainty, and be able to proclaim victoriously, “I have seen the Lord!”

WE SHOULD NOTE, FIRST OF ALL, THE SENSE OF HOPELESSNESS THAT HAD ENSHROULDED ALL THOSE WHO FOLLOWED JESUS AFTER HIS CRUCIFIXION.

If actions speak louder than words, those first disciples made it abundantly clear that they no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world. Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship for us. We cannot, however, appreciate the Easter message, if we cannot understand that the first Easter was born in total darkness.

Jesus’ disciples had believed that HE was the Messiah who had come to deliver Israel, but now Jesus lay dead in a borrowed grave — with a deep gash from a spear in His side, His hands and feet disfigured from the marks of nails, His brow a tangled mess of hair and blood where the crown of thorns once mocked His supposed kingship, His back a terrifying grid of open wounds from the lashes.

One would not want to see a dog die like Jesus died, much less a human being. There was no dignity in it at all. He hung there naked while soldiers jeered at Him and spat upon Him. Where were the 10,000 angels who could come at His beck and call? His followers cowered now behind closed doors — their emotions a mixture of cynicism and despair.

Perhaps you have been there. Maybe you have lived for a while behind closed doors. Many good people have.

I was reading recently about a young lawyer who descended into the valley of despair. Things were going so poorly for him that his friends thought it best to keep all knives and razors away from him for fear of a suicide attempt. In fact during this time he wrote in his memoirs, “I am now the most miserable man alive. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I fear I shall not.” The young lawyer who unleashed these desperate feelings of utter hopelessness? His name was Abraham Lincoln.

The two nights following Jesus’ crucifixion were the longest nights that those who loved Him would ever endure. Perhaps you have gone through your own long night. The words of a doctor, “I’m sorry, it is malignant. There is nothing we can do.” A phone call in the night,

“Mrs. Jones, there has been an accident. Could you come to the hospital?” The words of your accountant, “Bill, if you sell your assets now, you might be able to recoup part of your investment. Otherwise you stand to lose everything.” A parent to a young child: “You know, dear, Mommy and Daddy have not been getting along lately. We have decided to try living apart for a while.”

Many of you have had your own dark night of the soul. Easter was not born in the brightness of the day. The women came to the tomb while it was still dark.

**BUT LISTEN! WE NEED TO KNOW THAT HELP IS CLOSER THAN WE THINK!**

The darkness of the moment, and our tear-swollen eyes, may blind us to a friend who is standing quietly in the shadows nearby. Softly, He asks, “Woman, why are you weeping? Sir, why are you in such despair?” After listening to our complaint, He whispers our name, “Cheryl, Tom, John, Carol.” And we recognize that He has been there all the time. He is not dead, He is alive! Christ is alive and because He is alive we discover that the sun rises again, and birds sing, and joy begins to creep back into our life.

All of nature speaks of such a possibility. The rhythm of nature declares not only the glory of God, but the victory of life over death, hope over despair, light over darkness, joy over fear.

New life appears all about us as spring bursts into full blossom. The bud that appears on the rose that has seemed for a season lifeless and drab is God’s whisper to us, “You can make it through. I am nearer than you imagine. I will not let you fall.”

Bernard Tristain, a French novelist, was held captive with his wife by the Gestapo during World War II. “The time of fear is over,” Bernard told his wife when they were arrested. “Now comes the time of hope.” Think of that for a moment. “The time of fear is over, now comes the time of hope.”

A poet wrote that “hope springs eternal.” And it does! Hope is another way in which God whispers our name. As long as you believe that there is an answer, an answer will be found. I cannot recall any appearance of the risen Christ to an unbeliever! Your greatest ally in the long, dark night of the soul is your faith and your hope! “I am here,” Jesus says, “I will never forsake you.”

This brings us to the final thing we need to say on this Easter Sunday morning.

**THE VICTORY OF EASTER IS A GIFT AVAILABLE TO ANYONE WHO WILL RECEIVE IT.**

The New Testament was not written by Greeks who believed in the immortality of the soul. It was written by Jews who believed that when a person dies, he or she really dies. But because of their experience with the risen Christ, these first Christians knew that a gracious, loving God grants new life — eternal life — to all who will receive it.

As Christ was resurrected from the grave, so may you and I experience new life through Him. That is the gift Jesus longs to give each one of us. It is the opportunity to experience victorious living here and now.

Tim Zingale tells about a pastor standing at the door of his church on Easter Sunday. “I’ve never seen such a crowd in church,” a woman exclaimed.

The pastor didn’t know her, but apparently she was impressed by the number of people at church for Easter worship. Then, as she was shaking his hand and moving toward the outside of the church, she added, “Do you suppose it will make any difference?”

He held on to her hand so she couldn’t get away, “What do you mean?” he asked. “Will what make a difference?” “Easter,” she shot back. “Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?”

It certainly made a difference in the lives of those first disciples! They knew that Christ had conquered death and that caused them to give everything they had, including their own lives, to get the word out to others.

Has Easter made a difference in your life? Wouldn’t you like to have the kind of confidence in the power and purpose of God that those early followers had? You can, you know! It is God’s free gift to all who will receive it!

Are you peering anxiously into an empty tomb, this morning? Don’t give up! There is a friend closer than you think. He is calling your name. He is offering you a gift — it is the gift of abundant and eternal life. And it is available to you. All you have to do to get it, is to go to Jesus by faith, make Him the Lord of your life, and with His help, follow Him the best that you can. Jesus will take care of the rest because He desires a living breathing relationship with each one of you. God bless. Amen.

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