



"WE CAN LEARN TO LOVE AGAIN!"
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 118; JOHN 20:1-18
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, April 9, 2023, Easter Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

118:2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

118:14 The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

118:15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

118:16 the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."

118:17 I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

118:18 The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

John 20:1-18

20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

20:2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

20:3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

20:4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

20:5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

20:6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

20:7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

20:8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

20:9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

20:10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

20:12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

20:13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

20:14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

20:18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

There's an important woman we need to make space for today—someone we don't often spend enough time on on Easter Sunday. Someone who speaks truth in powerful ways. Someone who understands how painful love can be. Someone who understands that the world will never change if we don't learn to love again. You may have guessed who this woman is already: Pink!

(Put up image of Pink)

I'm thinking someday—maybe this summer, that I will do a Pink sermon series. Some of her songs just speak so strongly to what it means to grieve, to fight for justice, to find joy in being authentic, to find freedom in the truth, to try again when it's hard.

Today, it's one of her songs about love that can support our Easter celebration. Because when you think about it, Easter is really about God inviting us to learn to love again when we are not sure we know how.

(Take Pink image down)

Now we live in a world with some real limitations—and one of them is called copyright issues! I wish we could listen to Pink's powerful voice this morning, but because we are live streaming we cannot.

Wayne is amazing and he got this piano score from me yesterday—and all we need is just a few lines to support us.

(Wayne plays through the tune once)

Just a short few lines, let's say them together before we sing them.

(put words up on the screen on live stream and in sanctuary)

**Just give me a reason, just a little bit's enough.
Just a second we're not broken, just bent, and
we can learn to love again!**

Pink sings this duet with Nate Ruess (Roos).

So if you don't know this song, check it out later. It's about two people in love who are struggling as their love is changing—and parts of their love feel lost, parts of their love feel cosmic, parts of their love feel really painful, and parts of their love feel so powerful.

They're not broken, just bent. And they can learn to love again!

It makes me think of us, Grace Covenant. It makes me think of us as a community going through deep transformation. It makes me think of us as we find new ways to be together, to be community, to be people of faith who are honest about broken systems, structures, and institutions, to be people of faith who are honest about our own brokenness.

This sanctuary today is iconography of the way of life we are practicing—taking the pieces, the losses, the epiphanies, the creativity, the playfulness, the sharp edges, the imperfections, the truths of who we are and trusting God to show us how to make something new together.

We are building something new together, Grace Covenant.

We can learn to love again!

(Put words on the screen in the sanctuary and on livestream)

(Wayne plays again and we sing)

**Just give me a reason, just a little bit's enough.
Just a second we're not broken, just bent, and
we can learn to love again!**

(Words off the screen when we are done singing)

Now there's another woman, who we usually give more attention to on Easter than we do Pink. But today, she deserves even more of our time because she is our ancestor, she is a foremother in the faith. And she very probably knew Jesus better than anyone else. And she has not been treated fairly by the powers that be in the church.

Mary Magdalene Image #1 (split screen on live stream, full screen in sanctuary)

(Image #1 by Sue Ellen Parkinson)

Mary Magdalene was the first ever woman preacher in the Christian faith. In fact, she was actually the first ever preacher in the Christian faith after Jesus' death. She wasn't just the first woman, she was the first period.

But by the 6th century, the church fathers had begun teaching that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Pope Gregory the Great taught that Mary Magdalene was the same woman as an unnamed demon possessed woman mentioned in Mark. He basically had no basis for that claim—other than that he wanted to take Mary down to a level acceptable to him and the patriarchal church that he commanded.

Mary's importance and leadership and proximity to Jesus was a threat to the Roman church and so they took Mary's identity and made her into a fallen woman who Jesus took pity on.

They did that to her to take away her power, to take away from the deep and trusting relationship she had with Jesus. Mary is diminished in her power—and women were diminished in their status in the church right along with her.

It wasn't until 1969 that the church admitted that the teaching that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute was not biblical. But the damage was done and in some ways seems permanent. Many people still believe that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. And we really don't hear much else about her.

There are extracanonical texts (books that didn't make it into the Bible), like the Gospel of Phillip, one of the scrolls found in the Nag Hammadi discovery of the so-called "Gnostic Gospels," that suggest Mary and Jesus had a close relationship and that he loved her more than any of his other disciples. This particular 2nd century Gospel talks about how Jesus loved to kiss Mary.

He loved her. She loved him.

(Take Image #1 of Mary down)

Today let's make space for this deep love when we encounter John's resurrection account again.

Let's practice seeing Mary in her power today, in the depth of her grief, in the way her love for Jesus and who he was in the world propel her to go to his tomb and suffer another blow—that someone has taken him away.

“They have taken the Lord.”

How do we resonate with Mary's experience of Jesus being taken away from us.

(Split screen with Image #2 of Mary on the live stream; full screen in the sanctuary)

(Image #2 by Terese Nielson)

This man who understood Mary, who saw her gifts and called her to a new life in a culture where women were only acceptable when they were married—women were property, not equal partners.

Mary does not bear the name of a man, just where she was from—Magdala, a city on the shore of the sea of Galilee.

Mary's heart was broken—just a few days earlier she had seen Jesus brutally beaten and executed publicly. She had lost friends. She had seen people she thought she could trust betray the man she loved, betray her.

She stayed until the bitter end.

Some of the threads she was hanging onto were the threads of tending Jesus' grave. This is what love does in the wake of death—it weeps, it struggles to rest, it can't sleep, it wants to do something to hold on to the person who is now gone. Grief is love when death comes.

(Take Image #2 down)

Mary's grief was her connection to Jesus. Just imagine how lost she must have felt.

When she got to his grave and Jesus' body was gone—it was the second time “they” had taken him away—a retraumatizing loss—a reminder of her helplessness, a reminder of the withering power of Empire to dehumanize and desecrate, another blow to her spirit, another shattering moment in her life when she was left to pick up the pieces.

Oh and another thing, can you even imagine how annoyed Mary was with Peter? He had denied Jesus three times, he had betrayed this man they had given their lives to. Peter lost his courage when the moment of truth arrived—and now he's running to the grave.

And in the Gospel of John's account, Peter goes into the tomb and sees the burial clothes there. But then nothing—he says nothing, he does nothing. And still after everything, scripture says, he did not understand. And he just went home.

So Mary's left at the grave weeping alone.

And keep in mind that then years later, to add insult to injury—Peter gets a seat of honor in the church hierarchy, and Mary gets labeled a prostitute.

But back to the tomb: Mary's there alone, weeping. And she looks into the tomb and sees two angels sitting where Jesus' head and feet had been laying and they ask her why she's crying.

“They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they put him.”

Jesus appears to her and she doesn't recognize him until he calls her by name, “Mary!”

And Jesus says, “Don't hold on to me.”

Their love has to change—she has to learn to love again!

She has to go from seeing a man she thought was dead to seeing a person she couldn't recognize tell her that her life's purpose was now telling the world—not just that he was resurrected, but that he was ascending into some transcendent immediacy with Divine Love. And she needed to tell the world.

You remember a few weeks ago we talked about the agenda of John's Gospel. Does anyone remember it—it starts at the beginning of the Gospel and it's the golden thread throughout.

Jesus is Divine—Jesus is God.

And Mary is the one who is supposed to tell everyone about it–Mary is the very first evangelist, she is the very first preacher of the Gospel, she is the very first witness to the resurrection.

She is the model for how Divine Love meets us in life’s shattering moments–in the fullness of grief and of belief–that God is able to be with us there and show us what pieces to pick up to begin again, to begin building something new.

Mary was the beginning of the something new.

Mary was the first to learn to love again!

(Put words on the screen in the sanctuary and on livestream)

(Wayne plays again and we sing)

**Just give me a reason, just a little bit’s enough.
Just a second we’re not broken, just bent, and
we can learn to love again!**

(Words off the screen when we are done singing)

Which brings us to us–to Grace Covenant, this Easter Sunday 2023.

When we may be struggling to recognize Jesus because “they” have taken him away yet again.

Jesus was taken by white supremacy. Jesus was taken by slave owners. Jesus was taken by domestic abusers. Jesus was taken by the morality police. Jesus was taken by legislators, judges, teachers, preachers, bankers, lawyers, doctors.

Jesus was taken and used to justify things that have hurt us–things that have threatened to break us, to shatter us–things that have conspired to steal our full humanity along with Jesus’ true identity.

We’re sitting in the brokenness of political systems and social covenants, we’re sitting in the shards of broken promises in our public square and in our public schools, we’re left with the hard reality of the things that are lost in the poverty of a past (genocide, slavery,

de facto and de jure apartheid, stealing of labor and resources and life energy) that this country is refusing to deal with over and over again—we're sitting in the shrapnel of a world where the TN legislature can vote to expel two amazing young Black leaders from the State House the people elected them to serve in on their behalf.

We are sitting in the brokenness of those two Black leaders being expelled because they support not letting civilians have access to weapons of war that they are allowed to carry around at will and use to kill children in school, children at home—guns are the leading cause of death of children—and most of those deaths happen when children are in their own homes.

We're sitting in those broken pieces—and we're wondering where they took Jesus—where did he go, when those who profess to love him and to follow him advocate for laws that threaten the lives of trans and queer people, who want us to lie to our children in the public schools about slavery and racism in this country.

Here we are - a bunch of Mary's at the tomb—wondering what life can look like with Jesus taken away so violently. We can feel helpless to do anything about it. It can feel like we just need to give up on this Jesus thing. He's too far gone for us to trust him anymore.

What is the reason to keep trusting God? To keep believing we are loved? To believe that love can really change anything at all?

Maybe we can't learn to love again? Maybe its just too hard, maybe things are just too entrenched. Maybe we should just look in the tomb, say nothing, and go home like Peter did.

Or we can stick around for the hardest part—the part where Jesus appears in ways we had never expected and tells us we can learn to love again!

What are we learning new about how to love?

Picking up the pieces of the ways Christianity has been a carrier of some of the worst things human beings have come up with.

Those are the shards we are working with—so they are sharp, and handling them takes a lot of care. And we're not trying to put them back together again into the same thing they were. We're not trying to get back to something we used to have.

***We are trusting God with an unknown future—and with a yearning for a better world.
We are learning to love again.***

(Put words on the screen in the sanctuary and on livestream)

(Wayne plays again and we sing)

**Just give me a reason, just a little bit's enough.
Just a second we're not broken, just bent, and
we can learn to love again!**

(Words off the screen when we are done singing)

***Out of the broken pieces of paternalism, we are trying to piece together what true
partnership could be.***

Out of the deprivation of intellectualization, we are practicing inquiry and curiosity and being together with true emotions and big feelings.

We are letting go of the ways whiteness teaches us to play gotcha with ideas that are actually debating the humanity of some of our siblings in the human family.

We are letting go of gotcha, we are making space for grief, for the sorrow that comes when such deep harm has been done and continues to happen.

And we are trusting God as new things emerge, out of all the pieces, out of the space made by things we've lost.

***We are waking up from our nostalgia for a past that wasn't such a great past for a lot
of people.***

We are seeing how God is a God of creativity and novelty, not a God of nostalgia and stasis.

We are learning how to love again.

We are learning how to trust a God who wastes nothing. We are learning how to recognize the God who is the one who is making things new—especially things that we think are dead.

Mary had to learn to love again—by letting go.

We are having to learn to love again by letting go, too.

By not holding on to the Jesus we thought we knew.

We are learning to love again by letting Jesus show us who God really is.

God's power and love do not teach us to dominate, God's power and love do not teach us to be superior or to destroy or to diminish anyone's humanity.

God's power and love have flesh and blood and breath—and moral courage and healing compassion and a spirit that disrupts those of us who have become too comfortable with the Jesuses of our own making.

God's power and love accompanies those willing to do the hardest work of all—to learn to love again in a world that can be so disappointing and so devastating.

This Easter, Grace Covenant, let it be our capacity for Love that is resurrected—let it be our resolve to learn to love again that is even now ascending to a new kind of proximity to Divine Love.

Grace Covenant, we can learn to love again! We are learning to love again!

Christ is Risen!

And so is Divine Love!

And to that, I say: Hallelujah!

And thanks be to God!