



Roanoke, Virginia  
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## ***“Loving, and so Following”***

*Part VII of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”*

*Mark 16:1-8*

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Preachers who take their craft seriously often go down rabbit trails exploring topics, not because they want to, but because the sermon is asking questions. This past week, I did some reading in the ethics of Forensic Science where a huge issue is the handling of bodily remains. For most forensic scientists, it is not all about science. Some practitioners are tempted to think that understanding the cause of death is all that matters. But the community as a whole doesn't feel that way. They realize that it is important to remember that even with bones they represent living people who had relationships, people about whom stories could be told. Lives have been lived within a specific context of history, lives with their own issues, challenges, and triumphs. Those lives had value. Even the bodies of executed criminals are to be treated with respect.

The three women of our passage understand this. Jesus' body certainly wasn't treated respectfully before he died. The verbal taunts, physical abuse, and crucifixion were meant to degrade and humiliate. Yet, after Jesus' death, even Pilate bows to the ethics of treating the body with respect (perhaps it is because he knows Jesus to be innocent). He turns Jesus' body over to Joseph for a decent burial. Now, three days later, Mary, Jesus' mother; Mary Magdalene and Salome go to anoint Jesus' body to treat it with the respect Jesus deserved before he died. Listen:

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. <sup>2</sup>And very early



on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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.

In the sermons of Lent, we have been looking at different biblical examples of following Jesus, both positive and negative. With Jesus' arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion, we have learned that not many people have it within them to follow Jesus to the very end.

- The crowd that once adored Jesus turned on him.
- The religious leaders that were tracking him as to discredit him are home satisfied they were able to cancel him.
- Even the disciples
  - who gave themselves to his cause,
  - who listened to his teachings,
  - who followed his example,
  - who did his bidding,
  - have now abandoned him.

The disciples have gone home to do the kind of terrible work of grief. They loved Jesus, and that is why they followed him and wanted to be a part of his cause. Theirs is the kind of following we preaching pastors hoped to encourage with our sermon series and is the intent of the kind of following represented in our Mission Statement: "[Finding direction by following Jesus.](#)" But something is missing at the end.

Something the Apostle Paul wrote in one of his most quoted verses can help us understand what is missing. "[Faith, hope, love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love.](#)" Jesus told his disciples "[to love others as I have loved you.](#)" Faith in the God who is revealed in Christ leads to loving as we have been loved.

But notice the bridge between faith and love. It is hope.

How hard it is to live without hope, much less love without hope.

- How do you remain the lover when you are no longer loved?
- How do you serve a cause when the cause is lost?
- How do you remain a good citizen when you've lost faith in your community,
  - remain a good neighbor when neighbors are at war?



- And how do you follow someone who has died?

The disciples don't know how, and that is what makes the three women of our passage all the more remarkable. They are about as illogical as those forensic scientists who believe that bones ought to be treated with respect. The women follow

- even when the one they follow is dead,
- even when it is now only Jesus' body to be served,
- even when his tomb is the destination of their journey.

Jesus is dead, but they still think they have duties of love. Maybe it is a symbolic gesture that though their cause is lost, they still have not bought into the causes of those who killed him. Maybe. But I think the greater compulsion comes of love. Anointing Jesus' body is treating him with the respect he deserved—and maybe is something they can do to process their grief.

We can understand why Mary, the mother of Jesus, is about this business. Death cannot stop a mother's love of her child. And we can understand why she took other women—friends who are like family—with her. Grief will isolate you, and while others can't fully understand your grief, it is not time to be alone.

But I want to focus on the other two women. Not knowing much about Salome, I want to talk about Mary Magdelene. We know that she began following Jesus when she was liberated from demons.

I am not talking about her being forgiven for sexual sins. As much as I love the Mary Magdelene of *Jesus Christ Superstar* singing "I don't know how to love him?" (and me as a teenager thinking, "I don't know how to love her"), Jesus did not save Mary from a life of prostitution. That idea comes of mistakenly confusing her with the woman who washed Jesus' feet (though she also may not have been a prostitute), and because of a sermon preached by Pope Gregory in the sixth century. While preachers hope to preach sermons that will be remembered, it is good to keep in mind that some sermons should be forgotten, and Pope Gregory's sermon was one of them. For some reason, he felt compelled to ignore how the Bible casts Mary Magdelene as a role model for faith and cast her as a disgraced woman needing to be rescued from her shame.

No, if evidence between lines is to be read between the lines of scripture, the fact that Mary supported the work of Jesus and his disciples financially suggests that she was a respected woman of means.

But Jesus did help her. Again, it is said she was possessed by seven demons. The Bible doesn't say more than that, so all we can know is that her life was not her own back then, and Jesus gave her life back to her. Thank God, we do not know more than that, because now her story is anyone's story who somehow has found themselves living lives that are not really theirs.

- From the imprisoned, to the oppressed,



- from those who have lost their lives chasing money to those who have lost themselves within toxic relationships,
- from those serving the demands of their disease to those serving the demands of their bosses, peers, and cult leaders,
- from those who have lost their moral compass to those who are not allowed to follow their moral compass,

There are all kinds of ways many would long for someone to give them back their lives.

We don't know what those seven demons were, but Jesus gave Mary back her life. And then what did she do? Follow the example of nine of the lepers Jesus healed and go off to enjoy her liberation? No. She followed the example of the one leper who came back after being healed. Having been given back her life, she then devoted her life to following Jesus. Even, as we heard, becoming like one of his family. Hers was a life guided by love.

And, remarkably, hers was a life guided by love *even when hope was lost*. The disciples did as most of us are capable of doing, they followed only as far as hope would take them. These three—the mother and her two friends who had become family—follow past hope and into despair.

Let's take a moment to honor those who love even when hope is lost. I am talking about those

- who believe despite their unbelief,
- who serve when the cause is lost,
- who love when love is not returned.

To be clear, I am not talking about those who stay in toxic relationships, but I am talking about those who, remarkably, are able to love even those they leave. No judgement on those who can't. But let's be in wonder of those who somehow remain true to the duties of love even when hope is lost.

One thinks of Albert Camus portrayal of the Greek tragic hero Sisyphus who, knowing he has been condemned to an eternity of futility of rolling a rock up a mountain that will only roll back down again, rolls the rock up anyway. He does it because he chooses dignity even when dignity is a dream, living as though justice and compassion matter, though they are fantasies.

That's these women. They lovingly go to anoint the body even though the one who died will never return to them again. It is OK, I think, to be in awe of such people. I am.

But thank God the Bible does not ultimately call us to a life without hope. The end of Mark's Gospel turns a tragedy almost into a comedy.

You heard the story,



- how they found the tomb with the stone rolled away;
- how they did not find a body, but a stranger;
- how they were told that Jesus is not dead, but lives,
  - and that they are to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus will meet them again in Galilee;
- and how these tragic, Greek heroes, become the lovable characters of comedy who flee the scene when the house turns out to be haunted or the corpse rises from the casket.

That is going too far, I know. But it is not going too far to suggest that there is some hilarity intended in this telling. There is some laughter that is appropriate when a sure tragedy turns out to be amazingly, wondrously, even comically not true. Why else is laughter so often the physical response when something incredibly unexpected and wonderful happens?

Let's go back to what happened. How do you handle a moment when you are told someone who has died, is alive; someone you lost is to meet you again? How do you deal with the reality of death when you learn that there is life beyond it? Even within it? Fear is not unreasonable. These women who so bravely journeyed past hope, are afraid when they are asked to journey past despair. [“They tremble and tell no one,”](#) the passage says. Resurrection hope is a lot to take in, but if you believe the witness of the Gospels, it is the one hope that will not fail us.

This is a justice truth. I know, I know, that so many cling to the resurrection hope in a desperate way, hoping for an out when death must come. Sadly, what often comes of this escapist hope is an escape from the moral demands of life. But a true resurrection hope is this: It is finding hope in God even after all other hopes fail you. Lesser hopes are wonderful and can sustain you. We need them to keep us going. So, we hope:

- hope for a long life,
- hope for children and grandchildren,
- hope that a disease can be treated,
- hope that a broken relationship can be healed,
- Hope
  - of leaving home when you are a child,
  - of finding home when you are homeless,
  - of returning home when you are away,
  - of making a home with those you love.
- hope that a broken community can come together,
- hope for a victory in a cause,
- hope



- that the hungry be fed,
- that racism will be overcome,
- that a war will end,
- that genocide will stop,
- hope that death can be avoided,
- hope that Jesus will live and still the kingdom come.

We need hopes like these. Those are wonderful hopes; the kind of hopes that give direction and purpose to life, the kind of hopes that kept the disciples going while Jesus was alive. But what hope do we have when those hopes fail us?

Well, there is the hope that the women find so hard to accept, but is the underlying hope that can sustain us in our dogged service of reconciliation, justice and peace even when the cause seems lost. It is the hope of the resurrection. It is the hope that God will not let death and all it represents—injustice, toxicity, cruelty, despair—have the last word.

If you want to see what that sustaining hope looks like, read carefully the Book of Acts. What the disciples do in the book of Acts, after they are energized with their conviction that Jesus has been raised, is not to go throughout the world to preaching an escapist theology—“[Don't worry, life stinks, but in the end we are raised.](#)” No, they talk about and demonstrate what Jesus was about when he was alive as signs of eternal truth and eternal hope: the sick being treated, the hungry being fed, the desperate being encouraged, injustices being addressed, and courage shown even at the point of death.

In Acts, good but lesser hopes do fail the disciples. The disciples meet resistance that won't bend, are set back and some are killed. They can bear dashed hopes because they have this final hope that God will overcome death in bringing all things to a good end.

I'll try to put it as simply as I can. We can love living and love others best when we know that even though we die, there is a hope that will not abandon us. Jesus is raised. With that eternal hope to sustain us, let's live. Let's go back to the duties of love.

