

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

Beth was full of life. She loved people and was always chatting with someone. She had a kind heart, the kind of person who would do absolutely anything for anybody, which included giving you the shirt off her back or going out of her way to may your day a bit easier. She had the best smile, the kind that could light up any room. She was in fabulous physical shape. Beth was the PE teacher at the local middle school and was known for running beside her kids and playing volleyball with her students. She was an involved teacher always engaging and talking and listening, not one of those PE teachers who sat in a chair and watched. Outside of school, Beth was married to a man named Pat, her high school sweetheart, and had two beautiful boys, Grant and Connor.

One Saturday morning after she ate breakfast Beth did what she did most Saturday mornings, she headed down to her basement to run a few miles on the treadmill while the boys ate their cereal at the table with Pat reading the sports section of the newspaper. You see Pat, who also was in excellent shape, was one of the head wrestling coaches at Penn State so he understood her drive to stay fit. He supported her in that passion. Everything was on schedule, going as planned.

After what seemed like an extra-long work out, Pat became concerned about Beth and went down to check on her. What he would witness next would haunt him for the rest of his life. When Pat reached the bottom of the stairs, he was stopped in his tracks as he saw his beloved wife lying lifeless on the ground. He did everything he could to try and revive her, but it was too late. She was gone.

I remember the exact spot I was in when I got the call. I can remember the blood rushing to my ears, the way the panic settled like an anchor or a knot in the bottom of my stomach, the fear and trembling I felt for two of my favorite youth. And all I could hear in the phone was Pat screaming she was only thirty nine. Thirty nine. Thirty nine. Did you hear what is said? Thirty nine.

In my entire life I have never seen someone grieve harder than Pat. I watched him scream into the coffin, "I'm so sorry I didn't love you better. I'm so sorry I couldn't save you. You wanted me to tell you I loved you more and I never did. All you wanted was me to hold you and I didn't." I watched him lay on top of coffin before they lowered into the ground. I watched him sob uncontrollably and not be able to offer his boys any comfort since it was obvious he wasn't comforted at all. It was just Pat, in his grief, confronted with the harsh reality of death and darkness, the world around him seemingly closing in on him.

When I read our Gospel text from the book of John for this morning, the part about Mary standing at the tomb weeping, I couldn't help but think of Pat. And Marty. And Kay. And Christy. And Nancy. And every single widow and widower and mother and father of every funeral I have ever been a part of. I've buried over a hundred and fifty people in my decade as a pastor. And one thing I know, death is scary. It places a fear like no other in the pit of your stomach. It changes the world as we know it. It makes darkness creep in all around us. Death makes us feel hopeless.

Mary, like Pat, on that first Easter morning seemed pretty hopeless. She saw Simon Peter and the other disciple at the tomb. She saw that they believed and with their belief they returned to their homes. But not Mary. Here she was grieving the loss of her Messiah, her Lord, the one person who gave her a chance, who saw her for her and loved her anyway. She was devastated.

She didn't know what to do or where to turn. She didn't know how to act. All she knew was that she was heartbroken, heartbroken like all of us who stand at an open grave with our loved ones inside. The darkness was all around her and she became paralyzed, unable to move.

Then suddenly in the midst of her grief and despair Jesus shows up. She didn't recognize him at first, and he asks "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Then Jesus called her by her first name and she immediately recognized him and Mary cried out to him in relief and in hopefulness and love, "Teacher!" And suddenly the world didn't seem so hard or awful or overwhelming. Right in front of her was her heart's desire, her Lord.

Just as Jesus shows up in Mary's darkness, in the midst of her broken heartedness, Jesus also shows up for us. He shows up in our moments of our deepest darkest despair. He shows up in those moments when we aren't sure how we are going to make it through the next few minutes or hours or days, and he offers us the best gift of all, himself, the light that the darkness will NEVER be able to overcome. He shows up and gives us what we need, him.

Death isn't something fun to talk about. In fact, most of us want to avoid it like the plague. But our God who is full of love and mercy and compassion is even more powerful than death. And his word to us today is your futures are good. They are secure. Do not be in despair. Jesus tells us see him even when darkness is all around you. He promises to show up, to take care of you for all of your days, and to carry you from this life into the next.

Jesus knew exactly what Mary Magdalene needed on that first Easter morning. She needed to see him. She needed to be comforted by him and she needed to be sent out to spread the Good News to all who will listen. In the same way God knows what we need, too. He sees our hearts, our proudest moments and those moments we aren't so proud of, the ones that make

us want to hide just like Adam and Eve did all those years ago. He knows our thoughts. And in spite of all those things he claims us in the waters of our baptisms as his beloved. And he loves us with all he has. In fact, he loves us so much he sent his only son to die on the cross and overcome death so that we might have life abundant with him and all of our loved ones for all of eternity. That's pretty good news. It's life changing news.

But the good news doesn't end there. Jesus doesn't make us wait until we die for us to get this amazing gift. He comes to us now, today, here. He wants to get to know you and he wants you to get to know him. He wants a relationship with you. He wants you to know that you are loved and care for. He wants you to know that he intricately made each one of you and that God even knows the number of hairs you have on your head. He loves you no matter your flaws, in spite of your sin; he loves you unconditionally. And he promises to show up when you need him to, even when you can't see him; he's there. That's our God, all powerful, and sweet, and kind, and loving, and merciful and full of compassion, a God who knows exactly what we need and when we need it, a God who goes out ahead of us and prepares the way.

With a God like that who wouldn't go out and tell others? Who wouldn't want our loved ones and friends to know someone cares for them like God does? How could we be quiet? Jesus shows up. He confirms the truthfulness of his promises in the midst of our doubts. He comforts us. And then he sends us out into the world to proclaim his good news to all people. This wasn't just true for Mary Magdalene or Peter or the disciples. It wasn't just true for the Israelites or the Gentiles. It's true for us, today.

I pray in this season of Easter you would take time out of your busy lives to get to know Jesus and let him get to know you. I'd invite you to bask in his promises of seeing your heart and always showing up. And I'd invite you to hear his call to go out into the world, loving your

neighbor and proclaiming God's love for all people. Christ has risen. He has risen indeed!

Alleluia. Amen.