

Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

Evidently expecting to find Jesus' corpse, some of his women followers go to the tomb with embalming spices. After a perplexing encounter with the empty tomb and angelic visitors, the women become the first to proclaim the amazing news of resurrection.

¹On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.” “On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.” The women came to the tomb. What was that journey like? What was it like to crawl out of bed that morning, on the heels of being without their rabbi, their teacher, their miracle worker, their Messiah? He was dead. Have you ever lost a loved one and you woke up a couple of days later and realized, that those thoughts that came rushing back into your head, was not some nightmare, but actually was the new reality? It can be devastating. These women wake up and the realization that Jesus was gone, having been crucified like a common criminal, was not something they feared, it was something that had occurred right in front of their eyes. No longer would he be with them, no longer would they see the crowds thronging to him thirsty for his words of forgiveness, acceptance, and meaning; no longer would individuals be reaching out to him, hoping to even get a touch of his garments. No longer would his presence among them give them such hope of a different kind of world. Apparently, those who were afraid of him got their wish. Apparently, the powerful do win. Apparently, torture and violence toward the innocent would continue to occur. Apparently, those cast to the margins would need to remain there. Apparently, the poor and down trodden would remain left out. Apparently, peace was an illusion. Apparently, forgiveness, acceptance, and unconditional love ended up being for losers, not winners. Apparently, death has the ultimate say.

The women crawl out of their bed, or whatever placed they had crashed in the aftermath of these excruciating events, and they gather together, and they task themselves with finding some type of way of

grabbing common humanity and some form of closure. Now that the Sabbath had concluded, and the dark night skies were relenting, they would go to his tomb and at least respect his body with spices for a dignified burial. It was something at least. And though they likely knew guards had been placed there, they had some hope that they might be able to accomplish their mission. It was not a normal trek. It could mean danger for them too. But unlike the male disciples who were huddled behind locked doors, these women boldly, bravely, and solemnly begin the journey to the tomb of Jesus. This was not a joyous hike. This was not a simple walk in the park. This was a put one foot in front of the other, with the hope that just maybe something would go right for a change. Maybe they could go un-harassed, unhindered, and unfettered to the body of their Savior. The march to the tomb of death.

“Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. And it's not a cry that you hear at night. It's not somebody who's seen the light. It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. I've seen this room and I've walked this floor. You know, I used to live alone before I knew ya. And I've seen your flag on the marble arch. And love is not a victory march. It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.”

Many recognize these words of the increasingly popular and covered and recovered song “Hallelujah” written by Leonard Cohen. The song has a haunting and almost soul piercing melody and lyrics. And while many of the stanzas, dripping with biblical imagery, can be applied to various situations, I think of those women who in the earliest of dawn journeyed to that place of demise, that place of the ultimate ending. The place of death. Again that line: “And love is not a victory march. It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.” ...love is not a victory march. It's a cold and it's a broken

Hallelujah.” It was not a victory march that these women were on, it was a cold and a broken hallelujah. The women came from a place of difficulty to the empty tomb. We often too come from a place of difficulty - our homes, our lives, our predicaments, from bombings of Christians in Sri Lanka, to the celebration of the empty tomb – the church. We often come, while unlike the women who do not know what’s going to happen next; we come with the knowledge of the ending, but not always the experience of the ending - of knowing hope over despair, of know victory over defeat, and of knowing life over death. For despite the insight into the empty tomb, and the proclamation that he has risen, we often struggle in our faith march. Sometimes our march feels like a cold and broken hallelujah, even as we arrive at the tomb this day.

To greatly paraphrase Choosing Freelan: Church is hard. Church is hard for the person walking through the doors, afraid of judgment. Church is hard for the struggling family, who feel under the microscope of an entire body. Church is hard for the prodigal soul returning home, broken and battered by the world. Church is hard for the girl who looks like she has it all together, but doesn’t. Church is hard for the couple who fought the entire ride to the service. Church is hard for the single mom, surrounded by couples holding hands, and seemingly families that appear to have it altogether. Church is hard for the widow and widower who feel isolation alone in the pew, with no invitation to lunch afterward. Church is hard for the volunteer with an estranged child. Church is hard for the person singing worship songs, overwhelmed by the weight of the lyrics. Church is hard for the leaders who sometimes feel insecure in their roles. Church is hard for the nursery attendant who desperately longs for a baby to love. Church is hard for the single woman and the single man, praying God

brings them a mate. Church is hard for the teenager, wearing a scarlet letter, ashamed of his or her mistakes. Church is hard for the broken. Church can be hard for all of us. It's hard because on the outside it can look all shiny and perfect. Sunday best in behavior and dress. However, underneath those layers, we find a body of imperfect people, carnal souls, selfish motives. But, here is the beauty of church— Church isn't a building, mentality, or expectation. Church is a body. Church is a group of sinners, saved by grace, living in fellowship as saints. Church is a body of believers bound as brothers and sisters by an eternal love. Church is a holy ground where the broken stand as equals before the throne of grace. Church is a refuge for broken hearts and a training ground for deeper insights. Church is a converging of confrontation and invitation. Where our behaviors are often indicted, and hearts are invited to seek restoration. Church is a lesson in faith and trust. Church is a bearer of burdens and a giver of hope. Church is a family. A family coming together, setting aside differences, forgetting past mistakes, rejoicing in the smallest of victories. Church, the body, and the circle of sinners-turned-saints, is where the risen Savior resides, so even on the hard days, when we are at odds with a friend; when we've fought with our family members; when we've walked in bearing burdens heavier than our hearts can seemingly handle, trying to mask the pain with a smile on our face; when we've fought tears as the lyrics were sung; when we've walked back in, afraid and broken, after walking away; we remember, what the women discover on that life changing morning. God does conquer death. Unconditional love wins in the end. Hope is real.

What is your journey, your march like to the tomb like this morning? What are you leaving behind – what are you expecting to find? Could, we even imagine discovering a place that is empty of death? Sometimes it

feels like a cold and broken hallelujah, as we head toward the empty tomb, but the discovery becomes that Jesus is alive. Anger and shortcoming are crucified. God does reign. Hope has arose. We, like those women, can discover new life that supersedes anything life attempts to throw in the way. Our live can be restored! Our hope can be real! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.