

“Between Grief & Hope”

Luke 24:1-12

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

April 5, 2026

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Easter begins in the dark: the darkness of night just turning to dawn; the darkness of grief that led the women to Jesus’ tomb; the darkness of confusion that came upon them when they found the tomb empty; the darkness of fear when angels appeared. Easter begins in the dark. And so, if you find yourself in the dark this morning, like the women that first Easter dawn – grieving or confused or fearful – you have come to the right place. Grief, confusion, and fear are entirely appropriate responses to the sorrow and suffering and heartache that beset not only our personal lives but the world in which we live. We grieve what we have loved and lost, and it seems as though we have lost a lot!

Today, some of us are grieving the loss of someone we have loved more than life itself, and that pain is agonizing. But we don’t just grieve death. We also grieve the injustice we see all around us, and the war our tax dollars are waging against Iran. We grieve for the children in this affluent nation who go to bed hungry, and the refusal of government officials to address climate change before it’s too late. We grieve the arrogance of national and state leaders who refuse to listen when we cry out for justice and peace and even clean water. These are dark times here at home and around the world. But Easter begins in the dark.

The dark can be a scary place, of course. And grief is hard. So we try to mitigate it. We try to block it out. We numb ourselves with our intoxicant of choice. We busy ourselves with work and play and whatever it takes to distract our minds from our grief. We relive our old fears, our old narratives, our old wounds, looking for something – anything – to assuage that grief. But we come up empty-handed, and further traumatized. And so the question the

angels asked the women at the tomb is the question we need to ask ourselves: *Why do we seek the living among the dead?* Why, in our darkest hours, do we expect to find signs of life in the graveyards of our lives?

The story of Easter gives us an alternative to our fruitless search for relief from the heartaches and griefs of life. The story of Easter is, at its heart, a story of hope – hope that death does not have the final word – hope that light breaks into the darkest night, sparking our imagination that the way things have been is not the way things *must* be – not the way things *will* be. The story of Christ’s resurrection invites us to imagine a *new* creation – God’s creation of a world where justice and beauty reign – where, as Professor N. T. Wright put it, “bullies and the wicked empires of the world are not in charge.” Can you imagine a world where those in positions of power walk in the universal way and spirit that Jesus exemplified? A world where violence, empire, and despair don’t have the last word?

Our resurrection “alleluia” proclaims our faith that God is still at work creating a world of justice and peace – a world where light breaks through the darkness – where grief is accompanied by hope. Because Easter is not a single moment that happened two thousand years ago, but a *movement* that is underway right now – a movement that is breaking into the darkness of our time. That movement is sometimes obvious, as when millions of people gather at a No Kings protest. It is sometimes more subtle, when a congregation provides shelter to those at risk of deportation. And other times it is quite personal, when an act of love melts a hardened heart.

We don’t always know exactly what the Easter movement will look like or where it will take us. So we need to keep our hearts and minds and eyes and ears open if we want to see the light of the risen Christ breaking into the darkness. In particular, we need to listen for the voices of those who live on the margins.

In the resurrection story we learn that it was women who were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. It was the women who were first to proclaim the good news. It probably comes as no surprise that the apostles had trouble believing what the women said. They thought they were telling an "idle tale" – that they were talking nonsense – when they reported that Jesus' tomb was empty and that Jesus's body was nowhere to be found. Cultural attitudes were at play, despite the openness with which Jesus had welcomed women. It was hard for the core group of disciples to believe them.

And, as we know, these two thousand years later, many quarters of the religious establishment and the world at large still discount and even try to silence the voices of those they consign to the margins. And yet women, and people of color, and trans people, and differently abled people, and gay and lesbian people, and children, and the elderly keep showing up. They keep speaking out. Those of us whose political views our national leaders try to demonize keep showing up. We keep speaking out. Together, we carry love into places of grief. We call both the church and the larger world to account. We proclaim that resurrection is real – that the reign of God has already dawned. We shout our "alleluias" as a declaration of non-violent resistance to the empires of our time.

Because that's what Christ's resurrection means. Again, in the words of N.T. Wright: "If God's world of justice and mercy and beauty has already been inaugurated, then those who believe in Jesus' resurrection must be . . . people who do justice and mercy in the present . . . [who] work for God's healing love in creation; people who do beauty; people who celebrate art . . ."

That is our challenge this Easter Sunday. That is what it means to be Easter people. Rather than let grief become our everything, today we acknowledge that even in times of grief, hope breaks through like the dawn. And hope compels us to

action. Like the women at Jesus' tomb, we stand in amazement and wonder at the news that the bonds of death have been broken. We didn't see it happen. It happened in the dark. But the light is dawning. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!

Let the people say, Amen.