

“From Chaos and Emptiness to New Creation” based on John 20:1-18, Genesis 1:1-5, 2:7-9, 15-18

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Easter, April 17, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

It all started with nothing. An abyss. This is the foundation of our Judeo-Christian faith. This is the belief that apart from God, nothing exists, only chaos and confusion could be reality. The presence of God brings ‘shalom,’ or peace, wholeness, and abundance.

This is where John begins his gospel - rooted in his Jewish faith, revealing his experience with the new creation through Jesus, and he does so by grounding it in the creation of all things. He writes, “In the beginning was the Word, using the word ‘logos,’ or Reason and Rationale of God, and this Word of God, this ‘logos’ was God. The two cannot be separated.

But what's more, it's a clear allusion to Genesis, so there is more to see, including where the Spirit goes out and broods, incubates, creates order, and the Word speaks things into being. Let there be light. And there is light. It is separated from the darkness – the absence of God, that abyss and chaos. In the light, creation is visible. In the light, creation grows.

Today's passage moves us to the garden, the second creation story in Genesis. When God created Adam from dirt, giving a him a name meaning earthling, groundling, mud creature, literally.

And so, by this we saw the image of God emerge from out of the ground. And the being with this image was never meant to be a solitary creature. And so, a partner was made for it, and so Eve was made, so humanity becomes male and female, each made in God's image as covenant partners. She is called by God an ‘ezer,’ the very word God uses to describe Gods own relationship with humanity. Each creation story then, provides a way for us to understand basic truths.

So, John, mindful of his scriptures, shows these truths and has seen them in Jesus, never letting a good parallel go unnoticed. Once again, humanity, this time seen in its fullness, in Christ, emerges from the ground, the tomb, a new creation in the resurrected Jesus, the firstborn from among the dead, and there is a covenant partner, again a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was then sent as the first apostle, to proclaim the new creation. He is risen. Nothing would ever be the same again.

For the last six weeks, on Wednesday nights we have been looking at Mary Magdalene to see her as more than a name on the page, and I want to do the same for you today by considering what it means to go through Holy Saturday, the darkness, the chaos and abyss. What it means to then emerge aware of the risen Lord calling you, and proclaim it from a garden, from a place where life begins, where life flourishes, where life is abundant, and find that life, eternal life, even from amid, the sorrows and the challenges we all face in this life.

This was a day when the disciples who were following Jesus were left alone and afraid. It was the Sabbath, the mandatory day of rest, and so they did nothing. Besides, they could not really ‘do’ anything, except hide wherever they were. They were afraid of the Roman authorities, afraid that to go anywhere. Their life was at risk and they were afraid Jesus’ fate would be theirs

too. Their whole lives had changed, all in two days, and they didn't know what would come next. So, they just waited.

Now, Jesus had said very plainly in his teachings that He would die and rise again. But what they witnessed, wasn't something you'd expect a person to recover from. Jesus had been scourged with a whip, and beaten, forced to carry His own cross. Then He was nailed to that cross, where He bled out and likely suffocated. The soldiers made sure He was dead, driving a lance into His side. Water and blood gushed freely from the wound.

Imagine that you were Mary or another of the disciples and the grief you must have felt. Imagine being drained of hope in that way. His lifeless body was taken down from the tree, and He was sealed in a tomb by a boulder. Sure, Jesus said He would rise again, but at that point, aren't you likely to question what he said. Did He actually know what He was saying? Was He delusional? Were we delusional to follow him for three years? Was he the really the chosen one who we hoped for? What do we do now? We had to have heard Him wrong. He had to have been wrong. You saw that. This is too much.

I think that we can all identify with the disciples on that Saturday in some way. If nothing else, we have seen the world around us changed by this pandemic, by the conflict on the world stage, and the conflict we see here at home. We have loved ones who are sick, or worse, are dying, battling disease, and many of us have also lost loved ones in recent months. We can identify with that feeling of not knowing what to do, of not having the right words to say to comfort, of not having the energy or motivation when it feels like our worlds have changed.

Over this holy week, the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services led us on a journey, from the joy of remembering God's faithfulness with a meal, to Jesus's arrest, His sham of a trial, and onward to his execution at the hands of the Roman Empire. The pivot point from those services to today, is Holy Saturday, and Sherry Thomas did a fantastic job closing out Good Friday, with a nearly perfect song for that day, but it wasn't a hymn. The song is called "The Next Right Thing," and it comes from Disney's Frozen 2.

Over the past two years, I've seen this movie a lot and listened to the soundtrack even more. And this song is my favorite, partly because this movie came out just before the pandemic started and on that first Easter, I realized how it captures the feeling of Holy Saturday. It captures the feelings that Mary Magdalene and the other disciples must have felt. Now, spoiler alert, in the movie, Queen Elsa, essentially lays down her life, in order to get answers that might help save her people.

Her sister Anna is at first crippled by her grief, but she carries on what Elsa started. In this song, I believe she is expressing what Mary Magdalene must have felt, what Peter, Andrew, John, James, Matthew and Nathaniel must have felt, what James, Jude, Thomas, Simon and Philip, must have felt, and what the other Mary's, Salome, Cleopas and many others, including Jesus's own mother, all must have felt.

Anna sings, *"I've seen dark before, but not like this, this is cold, this is empty, this is numb. The life I knew is over, the lights are out, hello, darkness, I'm ready to succumb. I follow you around, I always have, but now you've gone to a place I cannot find. This grief has a gravity, it pulls me down, but a tiny voice whispers in my mind: 'You are lost, hope is gone, but you must go on, and do the next right thing.'"*

As faithful Jews, I don't doubt that the next right thing for the disciples was to pray, because to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, meant praying and keeping the Sabbath, It meant loving one another by grieving together, waiting to show their love for Jesus, by anointing Him for a proper burial, one that the Sabbath prevented.

Anna sings again, *"Can there be a day beyond this night? I don't know anymore what is true. I can't find my direction, I'm all alone. The only star that guided me was you. How to rise from the floor? If it's not you I'm rising for. Just do the next right thing. Take a step, step again. It is all that I can do the next right thing. I won't look too far ahead. It's too much for me to take but break it down to this next breath, this next step, this next choice is one that I can make."*

Jesus had been their rudder, their guide, their protector, and their everything for three years. The disciples are hiding, not only because they are scared that Rome will kill them too, but because they don't know what to do. They are lost. Hope is gone for them. What Anna expresses is the way we feel when we are grieving, and it makes sense that this is how the disciples felt too.

Anna goes on to sing, *"So, I'll walk through this night, stumbling blindly toward the light, And do the next right thing and, with it done, what comes then? When it's clear that everything will never be the same again, then I'll make the choice, to hear that voice, and do the next, right thing."*

This is the place that Mary Magdalene was in. She goes to the tomb as the next right thing. From the abyss, the deep emptiness, she has felt waiting on that sabbath night. Amid the deep feelings of chaos and confusion within her, she responds. It's doubtful she really knows what she's doing, apart from seeking Jesus. The other gospels tell us she had other women with her, but John focuses on her alone. She sees the tomb opened and runs back to tell the disciples her discovery. They run back and she follows, but when they leave, she remains to grieve.

The word usually translated usually as 'weeping,' is a word for a loud cry, a wailing, the helpless cry of someone in deep distress. Like the beloved disciple did at first, she only leans into the cave to look in, but stays out. She looks at the two figures dressed in white, standing where he was buried, and they ask why she cries so much. She thinks someone has taken Jesus's body. The thought of resurrection, especially from a death so gruesome, was hard for her to process, even as she knew him so well, had herself been healed by him of impossible demons.

She turns and sees someone she thinks is the gardener, and he asks her why she is crying too, and she says the same thing, but he responds by saying her name, 'Mary.' He knows her. And she knows him. She cries out, "Rabbouni!" or "Teacher!" He tells her not to touch him, but the word here is more than touch, but the word here is more than a touch, it is a touch that implies

some kind of attachment. I don't think Jesus is pushing her away here. I think he's telling her not to hold onto this. There is still more to come. This is just the start and you must proclaim it. You must go out and tell the others I'm alive. She is the told to preach the resurrection.

Out of the chaos and confusion, the abyss and emptiness, the Word of God speaks to Mary, and the Word speaks her name, enabling her to see Jesus for who he really is. Make no mistake, when John, who is a beautiful writer, lays out his gospel, he knows what he has seen with his own eyes and what he has read in Genesis and he makes these connections. This is because the resurrection for him was not some strange event, it was the starting point, the beginning of a new creation.

God laid out a story for him that begins with Jesus speaking all things into being, and it is Jesus who begins a new story again, raised to new life in a garden. This is why the Word, the very Reason and Rationale of God, becomes flesh for us: It is to call us by name, to have this same word that set all of creation into motion, speak to Mary, and to the disciples, and to all of us through what John has written to us.

God created all things out of nothing, and recreates you and I, even in our nothingness. No matter what is going on in the world that looks like chaos, no matter what is going on in your world that feels like abyss, know that your God shared in your humanity, and endured that cross for you, in solidarity with you, and did so for you, calling you by name. Yes, you are known completely, and you are loved.

Indeed, you are beloved, and only something so beloved as God's Son could redeem you. The resurrection is not a story or a fairytale that carries some moral lesson only. No, the resurrection is tied to the cross and it's tied to God being born a baby like you were. It is tied to the creation of all things, and to the renewal of all things.

Today is about God's grace calling you by name, not to condemn you, but to invite and empower you as a partner. Yes, this moment invites you to share in God's work, the ministry of reconciliation, as a partner, empowered by the Holy Spirit to love as you are loved, to forgive as you are forgiven, and to know, in the chaos and emptiness, that even when all seems lost, we do the next right thing. And just like Mary and the disciples, we will be empowered by God, to trust that new creation will break through. Amen.