

# Hoping Like Never Before

[John 20:1-18]

Rev. K Karpen and Rev. Emily Peck-McClain, April 16, 2006  
Easter Sunday

[John 20:1-18, "Hoping Like Never Before," Rev. K Karpen and Rev. Emily Peck-McClain, Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006]

[K Karpen] I'm struck by the part in the very beginning of the story where John tells us that it is still dark when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. John says it's early on the first day, but in Jewish culture the day began at sunset, so this could even be midnight or 2 am. How much she must have cared about Jesus to go and visit his grave in the dark. And we really never hear that it gets light. They say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, but it never seems to dawn, not the way John tells the story. Mary goes to the tomb, and though it's dark, she can tell that something's not right. Something's not the way it was supposed to be.

[Emily Peck-McClain] The first thing that hits me when I read this Scripture is the way it shows what happens to a community in crisis. Mary Magdalene starts out by herself, but she's obviously a part of the community of Jesus—"Jesus people," who were following him around. She's been to the cross with him. When she notices that the big stone covering the tomb is gone, she freaks out. She runs to seek other members of this community. The disciples (the beloved and Peter) run back with her, in the dark as you point out.

[K Karpen] So she comes back with Peter and another disciple, but it's still dark and they can't really see. They are groping around in the tomb, in the dark. The two disciples leave, still in the dark. And they leave Mary in the dark.

[Emily Peck-McClain] Yes, it says they "see and believe" but then it says "for as yet they did not understand." Strange. Makes you wonder what they believe, and what they understand. Then they return home. And Mary is left alone again.

[K Karpen] She's left alone, and she's left in the dark.

[Emily Peck-McClain] And she's crying. Is she crying because Jesus' body is gone? Is she weeping because those two other disciples have left her alone--after she ran to get them? She doesn't yet understand either—until Jesus finds her.

[K Karpen] But even when she sees Jesus, she doesn't see him. She thinks he's the gardener. She can't imagine that the person she misses so much, the person she's mourning for, the person she's praying for, the person she couldn't stand to be separated from, even in death, is standing in front of her. She's in the dark. She doesn't see him. Not until he speaks to her and calls her by her name. Then she sees.

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[Emily Peck-McClain] She sees in the dark, and goes to tell everyone else. It feels like she changes--she gains some wisdom. She's not weeping or running now. She has had an incredible revelation, an important realization, some kind of understanding that was only granted to her. And she goes to tell the Jesus people that Jesus is ascending to God. To a community in crisis, Jesus reminds them of God, of his proximity to God, through Mary—a unifying and pacifying fact. She's not running all freaked out to her friends this time. She simply goes and tells them what she has heard.

[K Karpen] I think she still doesn't really understand what it means, but she has some sense that their prayers have been answered. She's still in the dark, but she's not groping in the dark. She's gone from groping in the dark to hoping in the dark. Hoping that love somehow really does get the last word. Hoping that their relationship with Jesus can go on, on beyond death. Hoping that even death doesn't separate us from the love of God.

[Emily Peck-McClain] It reminds me of these pigeons I saw recently.

[K Karpen] Pigeons??

[Emily Peck-McClain] I don't usually look to pigeons as particularly inspiring creatures. However, a couple weeks ago, there was a very sick pigeon hanging out on my doorstep. Its feathers were messy and dirty, and unlike every other pigeon I have encountered in the city, it did not fly away as I came closer to unlock the door. It simply huddled there in the corner, hoping I wouldn't open the door too wide. It was there all day. And the next day, there were two pigeons. The sick one was huddled down and another, a friend, was just standing beside it. Again, neither bird moved as I came close, they just remained on the doorstep. It was like this for two more days. And then the sick bird finally died. The bird who was not sick still stuck around, until the body of the sick pigeon was disposed of.

[K Karpen] I did the pigeon-disposal task myself.

[Emily Peck-McClain] Thank you.

[K Karpen] It was an honor.

[Emily Peck-McClain] I am certainly not an expert on the behavior of pigeons, but it is my amateur opinion, after 4 years in New York, that

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pigeons are very devoted to their friends. I find Mary Magdalene to be similar to these pigeons.

[K Karpen] Really...?

[Emily Peck-McClain] Yes! The Gospel tells us that Jesus was not alone while he was on the cross. He was surrounded by other criminals on crosses around him, and Roman soldiers, and his devoted friends. Friends like Mary who would not leave his side, no matter how painful it was to watch him suffer and no matter how frightening it was to be there, near these nervous, deadly, Roman soldiers.

Mary Magdalene pushes this devotion even further. Even death does not stop her presence by his side. She wants to care for the body her teacher and friend has left behind. And she is devastated by the fact that his body is not there, not where it is supposed to be, not where she can continue her devotion and care. And when she finds this man she thinks is the gardener she begs him to tell her where the body is so she can have it back.

[K Karpen] I woke up the other day with a strange, nagging feeling that Mary Magdalene played a bigger role in the resurrection than I'd thought. What if the resurrection of Jesus was somehow in response to the anguished devotion and prayers of Mary and the disciples? Here she is, broken, torn apart by grief, praying like never before. What if God heard her? We have a God who responds. What if God responded to her?

[Emily Peck-McClain] That's an interesting thought. I'm not sure I'm ready to think that Mary caused the resurrection. I really think that it was going to happen no matter what - Jesus couldn't be conquered by death; it would go against who he is and who God is. I do think you're on to something though. Maybe the resurrection didn't come because of their anguish, but I'm certain that Jesus' decision to reveal himself to Mary—right there, in the garden, just steps away from the tomb that was supposed to hold him forever, before even going to God—was a response to her grief. How could he bear to see those so close to him, those who care enough to come to the tomb in the dark, those who run toward the place of death at the first sign of trouble, how could he bear to see them hurting so deeply?

[K Karpen] Exactly.

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[Emily Peck-McClain] Mary rushes toward Jesus when she realizes that it's him and he has to stop her. That's what makes me think his appearing to her at that time was a response to her pain. It's as if he couldn't help but respond to her anguish. Jesus' whole ministry eases the anguish of those who suffer the most pain—the

**blind, the leper, the outcast. Why would it change in death, especially when death didn't have the final word for Jesus?**

[K Karpen] I pray from time to time, but there was a time last Fall when I prayed like never before. I'd just gotten home from a trip when the phone rang. It was the sister of a friend, saying that her sister had ended up in the emergency room of the hospital, and she wasn't sure what was wrong, probably nothing, but could I go and check on her while she drove up from Virginia. I said ok, but when I got to the hospital, and was shown to her bedside, I couldn't even recognize my friend. It was dark by the time I got there, but even in the glare of hospital lights I couldn't recognize her. The valve of her heart had burst and they were trying to figure out how to keep her alive.

I stayed by her side all night. I couldn't do anything, I just didn't want her to be by herself. So I started to pray. I prayed like never before. I don't remember exactly what I said; I think I was kind of rude.

I said something like, "I don't ask you for much, God; you could do this one thing." And I prayed that over and over and over. Like never before.

She died twice that night, but I refused to let go. And God refused to let go. And, thank God, her doctors refused to let go.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] Thank God!**

[K Karpen] Looking back on it now, I realize that it was really a hopeless situation. Somehow we managed to hang onto hope anyway: me; her sister, speeding north through the night; the doctors, who could easily have given up; those of you I called between 5 and 6 in the morning, when I couldn't hope any more and couldn't pray anymore.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] It doesn't always work out like that.**

[K Karpen] No, it doesn't. To tell the truth, I didn't think it would work that night. I just hoped it would. Hoped like never before. And I had this amazing feeling that God was hoping along with me. Not that God was pulling the strings, or waiting for me to pray harder. More like God was praying, too.

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**[Emily Peck-McClain] When I was in high school, the younger brother of a friend of mine died. At his memorial service, which took place on a rainy afternoon under a tent in his favorite playground, I heard the song, "the darkest hour is just before dawn" for the first time. It felt so good to hear that and sing that. But months later, my friend was still devastated by the loss of her little brother. Years**

later she still misses him desperately. Sometimes we're still left in the dark even after the darkest hour, but somehow the dark just doesn't feel quite so oppressive. Somehow, maybe we're not alone. As you said, the Gospel never tells us that dawn breaks. But even if the sun hasn't risen yet, we feel it in the change that comes over Mary Magdalene.

Hoping like never before is hoping when it seems impossible and unreasonable to hope.

[K Karpen] That's right. But we do it anyway.

[Emily Peck-McClain] I still find it strange to think of Mary running toward the place of pain, in the dark. Logically, I can't imagine myself running toward pain; it makes so much more sense to run away. It's more reasonable. But I doubt it was reason that brought Mary to the tomb in the dark.

[K Karpen] No, I think it was hope. Unreasonable hope.

[Emily Peck-McClain] Yes, unreasonable hope. At the same time, Mary was a disciple of Jesus and all Jesus ever did was go running to the places of pain. Everywhere he went people were hurting. Maybe the place where Mary feels closest to Jesus is the place of pain. While I can't imagine running toward pain, I can imagine running toward Jesus.

[K Karpen] Yes, I can imagine doing that.

[Emily Peck-McClain] At our Maundy Thursday service, your lovely daughter came up to me and asked me all kinds of questions about the service we had put together. She asked me where Jesus was. I motioned around the room and said well, he's all over the place, right here with us. She rolled her eyes. She said she meant that she'd actually like to see him as a person, so where is he?

If I follow Mary Magdalene to the place of pain, to the place of Jesus, maybe I will see him as a person. Maybe for the first time! If we believe

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that Jesus is always with those who are in pain or outcast or oppressed, which I do believe, then Jesus, the person in the flesh, just like your daughter wishes him to be, is all over the city. All over the world. Jesus sleeps on our church steps at night. Jesus begs for a penny, a quarter, anything you've got for soup and sandwich on the subway. Jesus is in Baghdad trying to buy her weekly groceries without a bomb exploding. If I run toward the dark places, I will find Jesus there. In the flesh. Resurrected and living among us.

[K Karpen] I want to go there. I want to go to that place of pain, that place of Jesus. I want us all to go there. But most of us have more pain than we know what to do with, all on our own. And we feel like we're on our own, in our pain.

There are days I just feel like I don't need any more pain. I don't need anybody else's pain. I don't even need my own.

And yet I know that when I let myself feel that pain, the pain of disappointment, the pain of growing older, the pain of aging parents, the pain of feeling betrayed by somebody who shouldn't have done that to me... I never feel like I'm all on my own. I just don't. I never feel like I'm groping in the dark. I'm in the dark, but I'm hoping in the dark. Hoping like never before.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] It's strange to think of our pain and our anguish and our prayer playing a role in the resurrection. But if the disciples' pain over the loss of Jesus did play some role in the resurrection, maybe there is a way that some part of our pain can play a positive role. Maybe there is a way that our pain can help to heal a hurting world. Or at least one hurting person.**

[K Karpen] Some person who, like Mary, is grieving the loss of a friend, and not feeling that loss ease up as time moves on.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] Yes, some person who finds herself mired down in depression and whose darkest hours are just followed by more darkness.**

[K Karpen] Some person who is having trouble finding work, whose every lead seems to be leading no place.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] Someone who is just stuck in addiction and can't think or reason himself out of it.**

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[K Karpen] Sometimes there just isn't a way out of the pain. None we can see. We're just groping in the dark.

**[Emily Peck-McClain] I think we can look to Mary for inspiration. She starts by just groping in the dark—drawn by pain to the place of pain. She carries her pain to the place of pain; and there something strange happens. She finds she's not alone. She sees Jesus, and she sees him overcoming pain and death, and it changes her. She goes from groping in the dark to hoping in the dark. Hoping like never before.**

[K Karpen] I wonder what change the resurrection can make in us? I wonder if finding Jesus in our places of pain can make us different.

[Emily Peck-McClain] I feel like I'm in a dark place after having a bad week or getting into an argument with someone I care about. Jesus is in those places, too. The challenge for us, then, is to find Jesus, to latch onto hope while we're in those dark places. Like you said, to still be in the dark but to have some small piece of understanding about that dark. Hoping instead of groping.

[K Karpen] I spend a lot of time groping. Groping for something like Jesus. And I never find him. At least I don't recognize him. Thank God, Jesus recognizes me! Thank God, Jesus finds me! Thank God, Jesus calls me by my name! And in those moments when I feel his strange presence, I give up groping. I'm not sure I find certainties. I'm not always sure I find faith. But I start hoping. Hoping like never before.

[Emily Peck-McClain] Let's go into Easter and into the rest of our lives hoping. Instead of groping. Christ is with us! We are not alone!

[K Karpen] Christ is risen

[Emily Peck-McClain] Christ is risen indeed!

[K Karpen] Christ is risen!

[Emily Peck-McClain] Christ is risen indeed!

[K Karpen] Hallelujah!

[Emily Peck-McClain] Hallelujah!