

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Easter
Year A

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April 30, 2017

Text: John 20:1-18

Title: “Emerge: Tombs & Cocoons”

A few weeks ago, I learned the name of Sheryl Sandberg. She is the chief operating officer of Facebook. I learned her name because she was being interviewed about her husband’s death on one of the network news programs. Within a few days of hearing that interview I noticed that the TIME magazine on my desk had a photograph of her on the cover. The title of the article: “Life After Death.”

The article and the interview were about her husband’s death. They were in Mexico celebrating a friend’s birthday when she, her husband’s brother and his wife found him near the treadmill on which he was doing his morning workout. He was 47 years old. His brother tried CPR but he was already blue. Rushed him to the hospital. As she sat on the linoleum floor waiting with the others, the unwanted expectation was made plain. Dave was dead.

“The wails of her crying in that hospital were unlike anything that I’d ever heard in my life,” says ... the person whose birthday they were celebrating. “It was an awful, awful scene.”

As they were leaving [Dave’s]... body for the last time, [Sheryl]... ran back to give him one more hug. “I think for Sheryl, letting go of him physically meant letting go of the moment that this could somehow not be real,” says [her brother-in-law] Rob. “I had to gently pull her off of him. She just wanted to hug him and wanted him to be there and wanted him to come back.” (p. 39, TIME, April 24, 2017)

Hearing and reading Sandberg’s experience connected when hearing again the Gospel According to John share Mary’s experience with Jesus at the empty tomb.

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:1-18 (NRSV)).

This story begins with death. Mary going alone to the tomb in the darkness. This is only true in John's Gospel account. In the other accounts, she isn't alone and it isn't dark, but from the Gospel According to John, Mary is alone in her grief and in her approach to Jesus' tomb. It may be that the darkness expresses her grief. Anyone who has lost anyone close knows the pain of such a loss which can feel very much like being in the dark. It's hard to see without that person in your life anymore. It's disorienting and can leave you wondering if you'll see again.

Mary is walking in this kind of darkness as she makes her way to the tomb. It's not just the darkness of loss in which she is walking but also the darkness of a lack of recognition. She has not yet understood or embraced the possibility of life after death, life beyond death. She makes her way to the tomb looking for and expecting to find a body because that's what death does to us. It always leaves a body. So Mary is still in the dark because she does not yet know the power of the One whose kingdom is at hand, a kingdom that does not abide by our expectations, does not adhere to the ways of the world as we so often experience power in our world. Rather, in God's kingdom the first are last and the last first. In God's kingdom the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent empty away (Luke 1:53) as Jesus' mother Mary sang before his birth. In God's kingdom the greatest are the servants not the masters and serving the least of these is an act of serving Christ himself. In God's kingdom death is not the final word. But Mary, though Jesus has revealed God's power over and over again in the years

of his ministry, somehow--like the rest of his disciples--really doesn't believe it as she carefully makes her way through the darkness.

When she arrives and her pupils are fully dilated, she can see clearly enough to notice that the sealing stone has been moved and that the tomb in which the body had been laid was now wide open. She is so shocked she doesn't even look inside before she runs to Peter and Jesus' best friend to share her assumption that someone has stolen the body.

As they absorb the shock of her announcement the two men begin a footrace to the tomb to see for themselves. Not only was Mary in the dark but so were these two followers. They run like sprinters heading for the finish line. Whether Jesus' best friend was younger or in better shape who knows but he gets there first and chooses to simply look into the tomb, this place of death. No body. Just the burial clothes. Peter comes huffing and puffing behind him and immediately walks into the tomb, noticing not only the linens that would wrap the body but also the one used to wrap the head. If there was a robbery they were awfully neat about it. Grave robbers don't take the time to remove burial clothes and roll them up neatly like some do when packing their suitcase for a trip. If there was a robbery it would have been a grab-n-go affair.

Jesus' best friend enters and sees things up close in the dank, rocky cave. Of all Jesus' followers he is the first to recognize the power of God in this place. He is the first to see and believe. Nothing from Peter. No recognition at all. Just that he is in the cave, sees the burial clothes and goes home, Jesus' best friend joining him. No running this time. They just go home. One still in the darkness.

Mary lingers outside the tomb. Like Sheryl Sandberg in the hospital in which her husband was pronounced dead, her grief is deep and refuses to be comforted. She has no closure as she peers into the cave of a tomb in which it appears that as usual death has had the last word. But appearances when it comes to God's kingdom are illusive.

This morning we begin a new worship series called emerge using the symbol of a cocoon. To those who know nothing about the life of insects, cocoons appear as some lifeless growth on a twig or a wall or wherever the caterpillar decides to attach itself. It looks dead to us which is why, of course, it has been used by the church for centuries as a symbol of resurrection. It looks dead but we all know it isn't. Something miraculous is happening in spite of our inability to see it.

Mary peers into what appears to be the empty, lifeless tomb and hears a question, "Why are you weeping?" She repeats what she has already said: her assumption that they have taken the body of Jesus and she just wants to know where he is. That's all. Just tell her where he is so there can be some proper closure for those who love him. That's all she wants.

With that she turns around. She turns away from the lifeless tomb and reorients herself in such a way that she sees someone standing there, a gardener, she thinks. Again she hears a question, "Why are you weeping?" If there is any doubt that Mary is still in the dark, we hear for the third time she responds with her assumption that the body has been taken away and she just wants to know where it is.

Some scholars claim that she sees him as a gardener because this is about going all the way back to the garden of Eden in which human beings first separated themselves from God by disobeying God, and now in this garden, God is bringing reconciliation. God is healing the wounds that developed in that first garden.

Mary still doesn't really see him, doesn't really get it even in the light of the morning. That is until he calls her name. There is something about having your name called that gets our attention, isn't there? Maybe you remember the sitcom Cheers, the place where everybody

knows your name? When your name is known and called it brings recognition, calls us to attention. When someone knows your name there is an instant connection. It's about belonging and being known, especially if it's your mother and she uses your middle name.

The risen Jesus calls Mary by name and it's then that she comes to the light. It's then and only then that the darkness in which she has been walking and thinking and speaking is driven away by the presence of the risen One. The power of God brings life out of death. She has experienced it when she turned from the death of the empty tomb and turned toward the garden and the Gardener who tells her not to keep it to herself. "Do not hold on to me..." he tells her, "but go and tell..."

And so she does. She tells the disciples "I have seen the Lord!"

Whether or not we see death or resurrection can be a matter of our orientation to life. Do we spend more time peering in to the tomb expecting death to have the last word than we do turning around looking for the Gardener? Do we look at life and see all the cocoons as lifeless? It's easy to perceive life this way looking into the tomb of life.

Fred Kloepfer came to the office Friday to share a headline in that day's edition The Bay City Times: "Drug use eclipses alcohol in fatal crashes nationwide". The epidemic of drug addiction is a tool of death that can cause us to stand outside the tomb and peer in and think it's hopeless. There is no life there--no hope. That is one orientation to death. But there is another in keeping with God's kingdom that turns around and sees the Risen One in those who are working to bring hope to those suffering from addiction. The Risen Christ comes in the voice of those calling out the names of people who suffer from the disease—the addicted themselves and their families and friends. Jesus' voice is in the group that met here this last week as they continue to work on making an impact in order to try and save the lives of those succumbing to addiction and those who haven't succumbed yet but could do so in the future. Jesus' voice is in the Trustees and the Church Council who said "Yes" to establishing a Narcotics Anonymous group here so that others may hear him calling their names, too, turning from the tomb of hopelessness to the hope in the "Gardener".

When Sheryl Sandberg lost her husband, Dave, she took to Facebook and wrote:

"I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice.... You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past 30 days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void." Suddenly, [the] Superwoman [chief operating officer] became very human.

[Out of the voice of the empty tomb experience she offered some tips for those experiencing such a loss:]

Don't avoid the heartbroken (except when they obviously want to be avoided). Don't tell them that everything will be O.K. because, well, how would you know? And don't ask the bereaved how they are. Instead ask them how they are *that day*. [Through this experience of loss, one who knew her said,] "She was able to find some gratitude...and really think

about how she could share the experience she had in a way that would help other people.” (ibid., p.40)

The Risen One not only calls our names out of love and care for one and for all, but Christ also calls us to share the good news that with God life comes out of death, that there is resurrection and beauty and joy beyond the empty tomb. Sometimes it just means we have stop focusing on peering into the tomb and turn around to see the Gardener.

So in this next week, I’d like to humbly challenge us all that when we find ourselves in the darkness of thinking death and loss and pain are really the most powerful forces in life and that there is no hope, to turn around and spend some time with and give attention to the One whose power is not limited by the tomb but in fact lives beyond death. As the Apostle Paul preached:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)