

It's hard to believe that it's been 3 years since this church worshipped together in-person on Easter Sunday. A lot has happened in that time. Tracy Keenan, the last installed Senior Pastor of this church left Covenant in February of 2019 after 14 years of ministry. I imagine Easter 2019 was bittersweet for those of you who were here, celebrating the day of resurrection and new beginnings while still grieving the loss a leader that you dearly loved. A year later, the world shut down, and at the same time you lost a beloved Associate Pastor and then your interim pastor. If that weren't enough, you were separated for the rest of 2020. Then I arrived here in 2021, but we still weren't together in-person for Easter. Finally, after three years of change and loss at this church, not to mention the change and loss in our world at large, we gather today, celebrating bittersweet new beginnings, eager to live a more expansive life. Whether you've been at Covenant the whole time, or like me just a year, or perhaps you've come for the first time today, we gather to celebrate that God has brought us to a new day, after a long and difficult night.

Resurrection always begins in the dark. All four Gospels agree on this. **Luke says, "Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb."** Now, I get up early most mornings, and it doesn't matter what time of year it is, it's always still dark out. Unless you live at the North or South Pole, all mornings begin in darkness. This literal truth of our physical world points to a deeper spiritual reality, that **new beginnings start in the dark.** That was true on the first pages of the Bible that God creates light out of darkness. It was true on Easter, and it's true in our lives.

When we describe dark times in our lives, we usually refer to sadness and grief. What's struck me about the Easter story this year is that they are trauma-stories. We come to our worship services on Easter, ready to sing Alleluia! Our service is joyful, and yet the first Easter begins with anything but joy. These brave women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and those whom Luke simply calls "the other women," all of them have just endured a trauma we'd wish upon no one. They witnessed the person they'd placed their hopes and dreams upon be executed by the state. Surely, they were in shock and in the early stages of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder. Yet in the darkness of their grief, they somehow managed to put one foot in front of the other and go to tomb to honor their beloved teacher. That alone is worthy of admiration. Showing up for others when we are suffering is an act of courageous love, and courageous love is where resurrection begins.

When they arrive, they discover the stone has been rolled away. They go inside and see that Jesus' body isn't there. Luke says they were perplexed. I bet they were. They don't understand what's happened. How could they? The first emotion we hear named on Easter is confusion. Anyone whose been through a trauma knows that confusion is one of the most common feelings you'll have. Suffering disrupts the life we thought we had, and nothing makes sense anymore.

The women then see two men dressed in gleaming white clothing, and they are terrified. That's emotion number two: terror. Fear and panic are part of resurrection as well. The men ask them, **"Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but**

has been raised.” Then the women remember what Jesus had said, and they contemplate his words. So far, we have confusion, fear, and contemplation. The women then return and tell the men what they’ve seen and hear, but the men don’t believe them. How could they? After all, how many dead people do you know who’ve come back to life? I’d have my doubts too. Finally, Peter goes and finds the tomb empty and leaves in a state of wonder. Perplexity, fear, contemplation, doubt, and wonder. All these emotions are present that first Easter morning. Notice what we don’t see. Luke doesn’t say anything about joy, does he?

Now, I’m all for joy, but when you’ve been through a trauma, there’s no way to bypass the more difficult emotions, not if you want to live an expansive life. You have to go through the darkness before you can see the light. That’s just how it works. Princess Leia once said, “If you only trust the sun when you can see it, you’ll never make it through the night.” New beginnings always start in darkness, and darkness fills us with confusion, fear, and doubt, but if we let the darkness do its work, something new will come forth.

This week I heard the author Michael Lewis talking about the unexpected death of his beloved 19-year-old daughter last year in a car crash. In the fog of his grief, he wondered why he was so tired all the time and why he could never find his keys. Eventually he realized that his mind had always presumed a future with his daughter, and now his brain had to rewrite that future without her in it. He realized he was trying to break a story and remake it, because he just lost the main character. I imagine that’s what those disciples felt too, and at some point, we all do. How do we write a new story when it’s been broken? The hope of the resurrection is not that things will go back to the way they once were. Resurrection is about acknowledging and honoring what we’ve lost and then learning to tell a new story. It’s about going through the night of grief until eventually a new day dawns.

I want you to listen to a story about another woman named Mary who endured a trauma like no other yet found a way to tell a new story:

It would be easy — expected, even — for Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel to be enemies. After all, he killed Johnson's only son, in 1993. He went to prison for that — and toward the end of his sentence, he and Johnson made peace.

As a teenager in Minneapolis, Israel was involved with gangs and drugs. One night at a party, he got into a fight with Laramiun Byrd, 20, and shot and killed him. Oshea is now 34; he finished serving his prison sentence for murder about a year and a half ago.

Israel recently visited StoryCorps with Johnson, to discuss their relationship — and the forgiveness it is built upon. As Johnson recalls, their first face-to-face conversation took place at Stillwater Prison, when Israel agreed to her repeated requests to see him.

"I wanted to know if you were in the same mindset of what I remembered from court, where I wanted to go over and hurt you," Johnson tells Israel. "But you were not that 16-year-old. You were a grown man. I shared with you about my son."

"And he became human to me," Israel says.

At the end of their meeting at the prison, Johnson was overcome by emotion.

"The initial thing to do was just try and hold you up as best I can," Israel says, "just hug you like I would my own mother."

Johnson says, "After you left the room, I began to say, 'I just hugged the man that murdered my son.'

"And I instantly knew that all that anger and the animosity, all the stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for you — I knew it was over, that I had totally forgiven you."

Johnson founded From Death To Life: Two Mothers Coming Together for Healing, a support group for mothers who have lost their children to violence.

And for Israel, Johnson's forgiveness has brought both changes and challenges to his life.

"Sometimes I still don't know how to take it," he says, "because I haven't totally forgiven myself yet. It's something that I'm learning from you. I won't say that I have learned yet, because it's still a process that I'm going through."

"I treat you as I would treat my son," Johnson says. "And our relationship is beyond belief."

In fact, the two live right next door to one another in Minneapolis.

"So you can see what I'm doing — you know firsthand," Israel says.

And if he falls out of touch, Israel is sure to hear about it from Johnson — who calls out to him, he says, "'Boy, how come you ain't called over here to check on me in a couple of days? You ain't even asked me if I need my garbage to go out!' "

"Uh-huh," Johnson says with a laugh.

"I find those things funny, because it's a relationship with a mother for real," Israel says.

"Well, my natural son is no longer here. I didn't see him graduate. Now you're going to college. I'll have the opportunity to see you graduate," Johnson says. "I

didn't see him getting married. Hopefully one day, I'll be able to experience that with you."

Hearing her say those things, Israel says, gives him a reason to reach his goals.

"It motivates me to make sure that I stay on the right path," he says. "You still believe in me. And the fact that you can do it, despite how much pain I caused you — it's amazing."

But Israel is not the only one who's impressed.

"I know it's not an easy thing, you know, to be able to share our story together," Johnson says. "Even with us sitting here looking at each other right now, I know it's not an easy thing. So I admire that you can do this."

"I love you, lady."

"I love you too, son."

Can you imagine? I love you too, son. Resurrection does not restore what's been lost but transforms our loss into something new. Resurrection isn't not merely an event that took place 2000 years ago. It's available to you today. I don't know what grief you are carrying with you today or when and how your story broke. But I do know this, the night does not last forever, and your story isn't over yet. An expansive life courageously puts one foot in front of the other, through the darkness until the dawn breaks. Sikh activist **Valarie Kaur** said, **"What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"** On Easter, we see these are one in the same. Why do you look for the living among the dead? Darkness is just the beginning. Neither death nor trauma will get the last word. A new day is at hand, a new story can be told, because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia!