

There is a story about a 4-year old boy who, one night, was saying his prayers before going to sleep. When he got to the part, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take," he stopped abruptly. With his 4-year-old mind churning wildly, he turned to his mom and asked, "Mommy, what if I die before I'm all grown up?"

Stunned, like a parent can be, when a 4-year asks a question like that, the mother jumped in and tried to reassure her son, and calm him.

But the little boy wasn't satisfied, so he persisted. "Mommy, what would happen to me, if I died tonight?"

That's a big question.

It's not just a child's question is it?

That's a question that everyone, at one time or another will wrestle with.

"What will happen to me, if I die tonight?"

It's a spiritual question. And it's an Easter question.

Today's Easter Gospel takes us right to the heart of what Christians believe about life and death.

It's the first day of the week, Sunday morning, before dawn.

Mary, in her tremendous grief has gone to the tomb.

Just imagine her grief.

Imagine yourself at the grave of a person you deeply love.

Imagine the person in your life, who means the most to you, and imagine that person dying.

Mary's grief is that kind of grief.

But when she arrives, to her surprise, she sees that the tomb has been disturbed, the stone that had sealed the tomb, had been rolled away. And her fear was that the grave had been desecrated, that someone had vandalized Jesus' grave. On top of all the humiliation he had suffered, Mary was thinking that this was just one more indignity.

And so Mary runs to tell Simon Peter and John.

When they hear Mary's report they immediately run to the tomb.

We are told that John gets there first and he bend down to look into the tomb but he does not go in. Then Peter arrives, and being Peter, he walks right into the tomb. And he sees the same linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

Then, the Gospel tells us that John, entered the tomb and seeing he believed.

The root of Greek word that John uses for believed, is pronounced *pistuo*.
 And whenever that word is used in the Gospel of John, it does not mean a casual assent, or a shallow acceptance. If you *pistuo* something, you believe it with all your heart.
 And so believing with all their hearts, John and Peter returned to their homes.

But, Mary is so overwhelmed by her grief, she is still weeping outside the tomb.
 Finally, gathering the courage, she bends over to look in the tomb.
 And miraculously she sees two angels, who ask her, "Why are you weeping?"

She responds by explaining to them her fear that someone has stolen Jesus' body.
 When she had said this she turns around and she sees Jesus.
 But she does not yet recognize him.

When Jesus asks her why she is still weeping, thinking he's the gardener, she says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where his body is, so I may take proper care of it."

And then comes the most powerful moment in this Gospel.
 While Mary was still weeping, Jesus, called her by name, "Mary!"
 And at that moment, she turned to him and recognized him, and said, "Rabouni! -teacher."
 In that one moment of recognition, new life, resurrection came to Mary.

Then as Mary reached out for Jesus, he encouraged her, not to hold on to him,
 but instead to return to the other disciples and tell them, that he would be ascending to his Father.

And so, Mary, became the first evangelist. She went and announced the good news to the other disciples saying, "I have seen the Lord."

So let me ask you. "Have you seen the Lord?"
 "Have you seen Jesus in both the joys and sorrows of your life?"

That's the heart of the Easter Gospel. Do we see, and seeing, do we believe?

Jesus spoke a simple word to Mary, he called her by name. And that word changed her life forever.

There are words in our lives that can have a deep and lasting impact.
 There are words that kill and destroy and there are words that build up, and give new life.

Think about the deep and lasting impact of hearing of these words:

"I don't love you anymore." OR

"You can clean out your desk...you're fired." OR

"The test results have come back, you have cancer." OR

"We're sorry to report, there's been an accident, and it involved a loved one."

When we hear words like these something inside of us dies.
There is nothing we can imagine, that can take away the pain.

At the tomb, Mary certainly couldn't imagine, the change that was coming.
She couldn't imagine that the pain would be transformed.

And yet even in the midst of death Mary found life.

To be a Christian is to believe not only in the historic resurrection, the resurrection that took place almost 2000 years ago. It also means believing in Christ, who is living and active today. Christians are people who believe, who *pistuo* with their whole heart, and can give testimony that no matter what circumstance we face in life, Christ is Lord, over that circumstance.

The things of this world do not have the last word.
Even in death, there is the promise of eternal life.

Listen to how the hope of the Risen Lord, came to a man named Bud Petersen.
Bud was a big man who loved to tell big stories. He had told many – about old cars, and fishing and hunting.

But at a men's breakfast at church one morning, Bud became unusually serious as he told a story about his days as a foot soldier in General Patton's army in WW II. In December 1944, the German army captured Bud and many of his fellow soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge.

During their imprisonment of about 3 months, Bud lost 65 pounds.
Some of his fellow POW's starved to death.

"Our meals consisted of a little piece of bread and thin soup," Bud aid.

And yet, once a week, when Bud and others in his barracks got their little bit of bread, they would break off a goodly portion and save it for the night.

Why?

"The Roman Catholic chaplain – he was a prisoner too," said Bud.

"He came around to our barracks to give us communion."

Now, the men at his church breakfast, didn't often see tears in Bud's eyes, but they did during this story – tears remembering his buddies who survived and those who didn't and tears remembering Christ's presence in their darkness.

"I just knew Christ was there," Bud said.

And through his telling, all of the men at the breakfast knew it too.

Bud, and his fellow prisoners were desperately hungry men.

But as hungry as their stomachs were for bread,
their souls were hungrier still for the Bread of Life.

They needed food, but even more they needed to know that the light of Christ's love still shone
in their darkness.

So week after week, they shared the holy meal, until,
107 days after their captivity, they were freed on Easter, 1945.¹

Is Jesus your Bread of Life?

Do you want to know the kind of love, that will sustain you through anything?
Do you have the assurance that if you died tonight,
you would be with Jesus forever?

Well, this morning, Jesus is calling your name just like he called Mary's.
Jesus knows you.
Jesus loves you.

Jesus is calling you to see, and to believe, to believe with all your heart.

Jesus is calling you to trust and to follow.
To follow Jesus by gathering for fellowship, and to hear his word, and to receive the promise of
forgiveness in his holy meal.

That's my prayer for each of you
and there is nothing that would give me greater joy,
than to walk with you in faith. Amen

¹ Pr. Larry Henning, "Hungry for Bread", *The Lutheran*, April 2002.