

Reading: John 20:1-18

“Early on Sunday morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, and saw that the stone had been rolled away.”

These words from John's Gospel echo down to us across the centuries, and with them a whole new day has dawned.

But Mary discovers more than just an empty tomb, a few verses later Mary is to meet the Risen Christ.

Standing weeping outside the tomb, a man asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Thinking him to be the gardener, she explains how she is worried Jesus' body has been taken away. It is then that the single word that would transform her life and the life of billions of people is heard for the first time. He says her name, “Mary!”

Bursting with the news she goes quickly to tell others, “I have seen the Lord!”

Today we gather and hear the news too. The crucified dead and buried Jesus is now the risen and glorified Christ. It is not a surprise to us, we have been getting ready for 40 days for this news but, like Mary, we can hardly take it in.

It transformed Mary's life. Mary was, Luke tells us, healed of seven demons by Jesus.

Rosalie Schwarm had her demons too. Born into a violent home in rural Australia, every day held uncertainty, even danger, for her and her seven siblings.

Often left to fend for themselves by a withdrawn mother and an aggressive father, her siblings would often taunt Rosalie until she threw up. Molested too by outsiders, Rosalie quickly developed a mistrust of all men. Unable to cope any longer she ran away from home. At 14, she went to Melbourne and her life became darker and darker. Out of control she appeared before a judge. Facing a long prison sentence, she bargained with a God she didn't really believe in. “God if you're real get me out of this and I will serve you.” The judge stared at her a long time. “I don't know why I'm doing this,” she said, “but I'm letting you off on probation.” Rosalie seized the opportunity, and she visited her aunt whom she knew was a Christian. “I need this Jesus you've been talking about,” she said in desperation. Her aunt prayed for her, and she felt something dark leave her. It was replaced with an overwhelming sense of peace. “God's love had not only changed the world, it changed me too,” she recounted later.

Wanting a fresh start, she moved to Canada. She made new friends, one of whom became her husband. It was his faith and love that would restore her faith in men. Today she has three sons and has even reconciled with her father.

Now she tells people, "No matter what has happened in your life, there is hope in God."

That is the Easter faith in a nutshell: there IS hope.

I'm not sure my sister quite gets it. She texted me, "Brain cells die, skin cells die and even hair cells die. But the fat cells in my stomach must have Jesus as their Lord and Saviour since they seem to have eternal life!"

The Easter hope is not one that can be easily extinguished. I find the most convincing evidence of the resurrection, and there is a lot, is that afterwards the disciples were willing to lay down their lives for this Easter Jesus.

Unable to limit our Easter faith to just words alone the church uses symbols. One that is often used is the paschal candle. It is lit through the 50 days of the Easter season at baptisms and at funerals. I heard of one little girl who had been baptized as a baby. On the anniversary of her baptism each year the parents would light the candle that had been lit from the Easter candle and talk to her about what her baptism meant. That candle burned right down. One day, aged four, she was shopping with dad in the supermarket. She said, "Dad, I need a new baptism candle." So, they brought one. What came next surprised the family. When it came time to light the new candle the little girl insisted that it be lit from the old one. She had learned what we adults sometimes forget - that passing the light of Christ on is the reason it never goes out.

In Soviet Russia the authorities were determined to stamp out Christianity, this annoying faith that seemed to never die. So, they sent educationalists out to the villages. One such educator arrived in a remote village. The people of the village gathered to hear the learned man. After all it wasn't every day that someone came from Moscow. They listened with interest to the evils of the church, they were fascinated by the arguments against God and how it was all superstition and to really advance they needed to give up this faith. At the end of the long talk the village priest put up his hand. "Can I say something," he asked meekly. "If you must," the academic said, "but make it short." "Oh, I won't take long," he said. He stood up and said, "Alleluia, Christ has Risen," to which the villagers gave the thunderous response, "He has risen indeed. Alleluia!" The academic knew he was beaten.

I invite you today, maybe not here at church, maybe later when you get some time alone, to imagine yourself in the early dawn, going to the tomb just as Mary did. Use all your senses to paint a picture of what it looks like, the smells, the sensations, while all about the sun is just dawning. Only this time, the Risen Christ isn't going to say, "Mary!" but he is going to say your name. What does it feel like to be greeted by name by the newly alive Christ? Take as long as you need to process that moment. And allow the Risen Christ to

transform your life as he did Mary's life, Rosalie's life, a Russian village, and the lives of other people too numerous to count.