

“Love Stronger than the Grave”

2026

Dr. Janet Loman

Isaiah 65: 17-25 John 20:1-18

Isaiah 65:17-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

John 20:1-18

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. 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.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 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.’” 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.

Sermon: "Love Stronger than the Grave"
Most of us were taught in school

Dr. Janet Loman

that there is a rational explanation for everything,
 and everything fits within
 scientific laws of nature that can be tested.

We're pretty sure
 we can understand and can explain how the world works,
 so we live out our lives accordingly.

We've also learned by experience
 that life can be unfair and difficult,
 and that when we bump into walls of life's adversity
 we don't always recover from our losses ...
 ... but we know how the world works,
 so we live out our lives accordingly.

We know to be realistic, to be cautious and suspicious in life.
 We've learned to look for selfish motives and hidden agendas.
 We recognize that sometimes, things are beyond rescue,
 but somehow we must live and endure, often in desperation ...
 ... we're familiar with how the world works,
 for it's been pounded into our lives, for all of our lives...
 so we live out our lives accordingly.

Mary Magdalene knew all about how the world really works,
 for that had been
 brutally pounded into her on Friday at the crucifixion
 as she had watched Jesus suffer in agony on the cross.

Mary had traveled with Jesus, and her life was transformed;
 then she stood with his mother and others, looking on as he died,
 and later, she helped prepare his tortured body for the tomb.

She was realistic enough to know that it was all over,
 for she knew she
 had no choice but to live out her life accordingly.

Easter begins with Mary coming to the tomb in the predawn darkness.
 In John's gospel, darkness has poetic meaning beyond the literal,
 more than the physical darkness before the coming sunrise.

It also represents the moral darkness
 of the violence of conniving treachery and human depravity,
 and the emotional darkness
 of crushing loss and overwhelming despair and grief.

So she came to the tomb in the dark of Easter morning to mourn.
 The other gospels describe the women coming to the tomb with spices
 to complete the task of preparing his body.

After such a cruel and violent death,
 there was a need for closure, a chance to say a final goodbye.
 Certainly Mary knew it was over, that death is always the end,

rather, a resurrected and living Jesus
had left death behind along with the burial wrappings.

The way the disciples thought the world works, **was wrong-**
there was more ... much more than they thought or knew.
The end ---- really wasn't the end at all!

We assume that death is the sure and certain barrier,
that marks the end of all life and hope;

that there is no recovery from the big disasters of life,
that our failures and mistakes will always be with us.
But the resurrection of Jesus destroys all of that.

Jesus came as the true expression of God's love, invitation, and grace,
and showed that even the worst, the most violent,
cruel or unjust could not defeat.
Jesus' death and resurrection overturns the idea that suffering and death
are the final barricade of human experience.

On that first Easter, going to the tomb in the dark of early morning,
Mary Magdalene's world looked bleak and hopeless;
Jesus seemed to be defeated & gone.

BUT God had other plans... and if you read the Old Testament,
God always had a Plan B for overcoming human sin and death.

The way everyone thought the world works - **was wrong and deficient;**
because there was more -- much more than anyone knew ---
and because Jesus was resurrected,
we know there is something wonderful and amazing
and full of hope far beyond the way it seems to be.

Her reality changed when Jesus called Mary by name...
just as the Good Shepherd knows us and calls us by name.

Recognizing that Jesus has been raised from the dead,
Mary wraps her arms around her Lord;
but Jesus says, "Don't hold on to me".

Typical of John's gospel, the meaning of this is theological.

The Greek is very specific, "don't try to cling to me."

The point is, that Easter resurrection is not about
returning to the past or the way things used to be.
Resurrection did not cancel the hurt and tragedy of crucifixion.

Easter is not about making a few minor repairs of old problems;

it is the promise and hope of something entirely new!
 Jesus was not resurrected to resume his ministry in Palestine,
 but to be raised, and to call for the Holy Spirit to come & dwell among us,
the power, the promise and presence of "God with us" now.

So for us, Easter is not just celebrating the resurrection of Jesus
 as an historical event of more than twenty centuries ago.
 Jesus is not just a sacred memory of some distant past;
 but through the Holy Spirit,
 Jesus is a continuing presence and person who makes us whole,
 and gives us hope; for even in the worst situation and loss,
 his gracious love & compassion still calls us by name.

The words, "Don't cling to me," are also timely words for us.
 We can easily relate to Mary's connection to and deep love for Jesus,
 who had healed her of "demons" -- in those days, the term for unexplainable illness
 such as epilepsy or depression. Mary had been a tortured soul,
 and was leading a miserable, secluded life when she met Jesus.
 He had truly healed and transformed her life, and she became his faithful and devoted follower.

In many ways, like Mary,
 God has continually transformed us into a real family of God;
 we remember Norm Story's 22-year ministry with deep appreciation for all the gifts,
 spiritual and practical, he imparted to us,
 out of his love and concern for us;
 and I can declare this to be the truth,
 for I have been a member of this congregation since 1970.

Norm changed me in ways I cannot fully describe,
 but probably the most influential phrase he taught me- and perhaps said to you as well- was,
 "We are who we are."
 These words opened the door to a completely new perspective
 of relationship with others. It reminded me that while we are a result of
 our genes, our upbringing, our culture, education,
 and personal interactions with those near to us,
 there is still that "inner core" of identity that doesn't easily change
 without a close relationship with God's word to influence our lives.

As Rev. Larry Hicks mentioned last week, there are 2 billion Christians in the world today.
 It would be impossible for Jesus to relate to us all with his physical presence!
 The gift of the Holy Spirit is God's way of "keeping us close."
 The importance of prayer and Bible study cannot be overemphasized.
 We cling to these things so that we may continue to see the truth
 that "Jesus is who he is," --our ultimate Teacher --

and to realize we are securely in God's hands!

Norm's love for this church was, thank God, stronger than all the frustrations
and disappointments we delivered to him!

And it is that deep love of God on his part,
so genuinely, patiently, and generously given to us,
that began our transformation.

I can see it clearly in my mind's eye throughout the years.
Our call is to cling to, and nurture, this legacy.

In stark sharp contrast to how we expect the world to work,
God intervenes - God raises the dead, God sends the Holy Spirit --
and absolute defeat turns into glorious victory and joy.

Everyone who thought they knew the ways of the world and so lived accordingly;
find that it's not true anymore, if it ever was; and by grace, God has intervened.

And so Mary was the first
to proclaim the Good News of Easter ---
the very essence of Christianity: "I have seen the Lord" -

and the fact that Jesus was raised by the Father,
is divine vindication of the life words and deeds of Jesus,
that his death was a great wrong that has been
overturned by **a higher judge**, by the Lord God Almighty.

This is sure proof and assurance that life is stronger than death,
that God's love is stronger than sin and the grave,
and that Jesus Christ is our risen Lord and Savior,
who still lives and calls us into relationship,
and brings us through
even the roughest places in life.

Easter places new and wonderful possibilities before us,

that wherever we are, whatever our circumstances,
death and defeat do not have the last word --
for God has torn down death and disaster...

Our hope rests upon God whose power and mercy have no limits,
and who offers possibilities beyond what we ever even hoped.

The meaning of Easter is to be willing to be found by the Good Shepherd,
letting God into our lives to turn things around.
Easter is responding to Jesus calling us each by name,
offering grace for all the second chances we need ...

... and much like taking the battery out of your cellphone,
it's a total reset and a fresh and whole new beginning.

The resurrection of our Lord isn't just an event of 2000 years ago, but today!

Look around and see God's movement in our midst -

and let us live the most powerful words ever proclaimed:

"I have seen the Lord" ---

"This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it"

-- for the Lord is risen, He is risen indeed!