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Isaiah 25:1-10a; John 20:1-18

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Deep Living

<https://mwc-cmm.org/resources/easter-video>

Mennonite World Conference Easter Video

As this Lenten season comes to its final culmination in resurrection, we remember our journey through the wilderness; we remember that deep relationship, accompanied by deep commitment and deep wisdom, leads to deep healing and deep growth. The experiences of deep healing and growth give us the testimony and foundation of deep hope. Deep hope then is embodied in deep living, which means actions, thoughts, and words that seek to imitate the life and teaching of our resurrected savior, Jesus. Our two texts this morning are wonderful examples of the progression of our interconnected Lenten theme ideas, those things that are deep and true about our lives. The characters of both stories are attempting to figure out how the healing and growth in their relationships with God and each other now shapes their day-by-day living.

Our passage in Isaiah 25 comes right in the middle of what some scholars have called Isaiah's apocalypse, made up by chapters 24-27. Thought to be written after the exiles have returned to Jerusalem in the late 6th or early 5th century BCE, these verses are a creative way to instill hope in the families who have returned to Jerusalem from exile and are attempting to rebuild the city. One helpful way of understanding apocalyptic literature is to think of it as creative imagining written out, a way of unveiling what is really going on in the universe when personal circumstances are overwhelmingly difficult to cope with. Little power, few resources, and rebuilding from the ground up would seem like an insurmountable task to a remnant of

people who had been wondering this entire time where God had been when Jerusalem was destroyed in the first place when their ancestors had been taken into exile.

The author of Isaiah 25 then engages in this creative imagining as a way of encouraging his Israelite neighbors who are finding it difficult to keep working on the city walls every day. This imagining then brings out the first five verses, in which YHWH has become a refuge, a shelter, and a shade for the needy and the poor, most likely referring to the remnant of people attempting to live in Jerusalem in this time. YHWH also has taken care of this tiny group's fears and anxiety of another empire sweeping into the area and carrying them off again by imagining the devastation of the great cities of the empires around them. Just like the Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom in Samaria, and the Babylonians had wiped out the southern kingdom in Jerusalem, the author of this first poem is telling the returned people that God will vindicate his people by destroying the mighty and powerful in the same ways that they had destroyed Jerusalem. God will act on his people's behalf and bring judgment upon all of the empires that had humiliated the people of their conquered lands. Though this small group of people in Jerusalem around 500 BCE cannot depend on themselves for protection, they can depend on and trust YHWH to act when she is needed. Though this small restoration crew in Jerusalem may not see it or hear about it yet, their covenantal God is working behind the scenes overcoming the powers of empire and evil and helping fortify this meager group who chose to return from exile.

We wonder if the followers of Jesus in the first century CE are in a similar frame of mind to their ancient ancestors 500 years prior as the sun comes up on the day after Sabbath, the second day after Jesus's death on a Roman cross. According to John's gospel account, Mary Magdalene is going to the tomb to grieve and anoint the body with spices and perfumes, an

honor to the dead, but when she arrives, the stone is rolled away from the opening of the tomb, and Jesus's body is gone. Could things get any worse? Not only had their teacher, healer, sustainer, and friend been executed by a mob on Passover, but now some thieves had taken his body, a great dishonor and shame to all of Jesus's followers. Had the Jewish authorities and the Roman empire not done enough to humiliate this peasant rabbi from Galilee?

Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem just over a week ago. The people had expected him to throw out the Romans from Jerusalem or the great Mount Zion, and restore the kingdom of David, but none of that had happened. Even worse, Jesus never got another chance to continue his ministry back in Galilee. The authorities had falsely accused him, traded him for a criminal, and persuaded the Romans to execute him publicly, another example to all of the people of Jerusalem to not be on the wrong side of the Jewish or Roman rulers. Devastated, discouraged, and defeated, how is Mary supposed to make sense of an empty tomb? In these moments, Mary cannot think any other story. She is convinced that it's all over, all hope is gone, similar to how the exiles would have felt surrounded by empire with Jerusalem's walls in shambles.

Mary Magdalene runs to get Peter and John, who come right away to the tomb, but they also are confused as to what has happened. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, gets to the tomb first, seeing the linens that Jesus had been wrapped in, now lying by themselves. Unlike Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead and walked out of the tomb with his linens around him still, Jesus's burial materials are still in the tomb. The two disciples leave, John having realized but not completely what has happened while Peter seems still to not know what is going on. Mary Magdalene stays at the tomb weeping in light of all that has happened. She speaks with two angels who wonder why she is weeping, and after telling them, she sees who she thinks is the gardener. She immediately begs this man to tell her where he has taken Jesus's body. Only when

the gardener speaks her name does she realize that this man is Jesus, who was dead but is now alive. Jesus tells her to go, making her the first evangelist in the story, to the other disciples and followers. It is interesting to note that in the first century, a woman's testimony in court held no weight, so why would they not have had one of the twelve disciples be the first witness to Jesus's resurrected appearance. I think Mary was the first evangelist; her vital role in this story helps us remember Jesus's teaching and ministry about God's upside-down kingdom, in which the last shall be first and the first shall be last. In this new kingdom, which has now been proven true and real by the resurrection of its leader, the powerful will be brought low and the weak will be filled with power and strength. Just as the prophet in Isaiah 25 speaks over the powerful cities and nations of empire that YHWH will still their armies, that God will silence their trumpet blasts, that the Almighty will protect the remnant in Jerusalem against the ruthlessness of violent conquest, Jesus is the hope and strength that his defeated followers need so that death and violence and hopelessness and suffering do not have the final say; Easter morning is here. God has acted on behalf of his people, suffering at the hands of empire on a cross, familiar with their pain and anxiety and dismal outlook, but that was not the end of the story. Empire and death, violence and greed, hopelessness and grief, darkness and betrayal do not have the final say.

In this moment in the gospel of John as Mary runs to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord, we should be hearing echoes of Isaiah 25, pieces of hope, resilience, and powerful imagining as the prophet has predicted even in some of Israel's darkest moments. In the resurrection of Jesus, we see the beginnings of the great banquet that is to come and is described in the second poem of Isaiah 25 in verse 6-10a. On this mountain, that is mount Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem, God is going to make a great feast, to which all people will be invited. On this mountain, God will swallow up death forever, wiping away every tear of the suffering and

pain of exile as well as all of the disgrace and humiliation of being conquered, subdued, and murdered by empire. On this mountain, the people will rejoice because the Lord God almighty has saved all people. Amen.

The resurrected Jesus is the first fruit or example of this great promise, this great imagining of the world that God will one day fully consummate by renewing and restoring all of creation. Jesus is just the beginning of the great feast, the promise of enough for all people, the fulfillment of the commitments that God has made to all people. No matter what the people have done, even going to the point of murdering God on a cross, God will not relent or give up. God's love and forgiveness took the full weight of evil and suffering on the cross in Jesus, and now we can be glad and rejoice because we do not have to fear or worry or anxiously await the possibility of death because death is not our end. Resurrection is coming. Our God has the final say. God will vindicate his people as God did when he led them back from exile and as God did when he raised Jesus from the dead.

However, we struggle daily to live into the realities and promises of resurrection. Often we fear the power of empire or the state more than we trust in the power of God's love and grace. Mary Magdalene too was afraid of what the world was really like in light of Jesus's death, but could she, like us, really come to terms with what the world is really like if Jesus were resurrected? If the world is only what caused Jesus's death: corruption, greed, lust for power, fear, anxiety, worry, idolatry, and empire, then what room is there to hope or imagine a different life? However, to live in light of Jesus's resurrection and the power of God to reshape history is to hope and imagine and rejoice and dance and live, that is live deeply. Death does not have the final say, nor do our enemies when they ridicule and seek our downfall, when they take advantage of us or mock us for believing a fairy tale like resurrection.

We walk out of this place, this building renewed in the hope of resurrection and the deep living that it requires of us. This deep living is marked by all that we have seen and heard and experienced in our scripture passages above: enough for all people, inclusion of all nations, the restoration of creation, the salvation of our bodies, minds, and souls. Deep living requires creative imagination, the ability to envision the world in light of resurrection rather than death and work toward that better world that the Spirit is inspiring in us as the Spirit was inspiring in the prophet 2500 years ago. How are you telling the people around you as Mary did so long ago, “I have seen the Lord,” and then inviting them to imagine with you, with us?