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Catch Your Breath in Times of Fear

May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you know the feeling you get when you are so distraught that you can't see straight? Whether it's tears blocking your vision, or the emotions swirling in your mind, you just can't focus on what's before you. When you feel like all the air has been sucked out of your lungs and your chest is about to cave in on itself?

This is how grief can feel... We all know the ache of grief, when we lose someone we love. It feels like we'll never be able to take a full breath again. I had my first experience with this all-encompassing punch of grief when I was in high school and my sisters slid the newspaper in front of me. I looked down and started reading about a car accident that had killed a young girl my age... and then my gaze landed on the name... Kristie Kohlhepp... my childhood best friend. My knees buckled, and I couldn't catch my breath. My mind started racing... when had I spoken to her last... my family had moved away a few years prior and we hadn't kept in touch as much as we'd promised. I started to blame myself... if we hadn't moved away, I might have been able to prevent this somehow...

Isn't it strange how when we're deep in the grips of grief, we beat ourselves up for not doing more... even when there was nothing more we could have done??? I found myself turning to my sisters, allowing them to comfort me, and remind me that this was not my fault. Accidents happen, and while this was a tragic loss, all I could do now was live in a way that honored her memory and celebrated life the way she and I had always done together.

We all have stories like this... of times in our life when we have had to face devastating losses; been knocked down by grief that simply took our breath away! As much as we may want to avoid these tragedies, they are a part of life... the question is, how we will face them when they come?

It is this type of grief that I imagine clutched at the heart of Mary Magdalene in our gospel reading this morning. Mary goes to the tomb, already deep in grief at the violent and senseless death of Jesus, the one she and so many had come to rely on. John doesn't tell us why Mary comes. Maybe she is there to grieve. Maybe she comes to remember and give

thanks for the life of this savior who had changed her life forever. Maybe Mary comes because she needs some time alone to think and to sort out what the past few days' events mean for her, and what's next. John doesn't tell us.

But she shows up "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark," only to find the stone rolled away from the tomb. After running to get Simon Peter, and racing back with him and another disciple, they face the difficult situation of Jesus' missing body together. Mary stands outside of the empty tomb weeping, a fresh wave of grief rolling over her. The sight of Jesus' empty tomb doesn't alleviate her grief though... in fact it seems to increase its desperation. Her first thought is not one of resurrection, but of a stolen body. In her despair, she turns around and sees a man she believes to be the gardener, and only when Jesus calls her by name, are her eyes opened, and she sees him standing there with her in the garden. As the story is told in John's gospel, the power of resurrection is not found in the grief of the empty tomb, but in the personal encounter Mary has with the risen Lord. It is only when Mary experiences Christ's presence with her that she finds hope in the face of her grief.

When we find ourselves deep in our grief, Christ comes to meet us where we are, through the relationships of those around us, and speaks words of peace and hope, breathing new life into the darkness. In the midst of our grief, we are invited to catch our breath and trust in the Living God who reminds us that even the worst news does not have the final word over our lives. There is always hope and new life that is ready to rise up among us... if we but believe and live into it!

This unfortunately is easier said than done... There is so much in our daily lives that weighs us down and steals away our breath. In our world where division and hate seem to rule the day, where gun violence is still an awful truth, where we are pushed to pick sides of the political divide rather than work together, where the opioid epidemic is stealing the lives of too many of our young people, and cancer diagnoses come at a staggering rate, and we STILL judge our neighbors by the color of their skin or the nation of their origin, or their gender identity or sexual orientation, rather than the content of their character... In a world such as this... wouldn't it be easier to allow our grief to take over, wiping away all sense of hope for a better, brighter future?

Easier??? maybe? But right? No!

The astonishing hope of Easter is that resurrection and transformation are real... not only for Christ and for his disciples whose lives were changed dramatically after what Mary and the disciples discovered at the tomb... but for us as well. We don't need to stay locked up in our grief, barely able to catch our breath from the chaos of our lives! We too are called forth from death to life, as we proclaim the truth that love triumphs over hate, that light conquers the darkness.

On this Easter morning, when hope rises with the dawning of a new day, I invite us to wrestle with how God might be calling us to leave behind the tombs of our grief... to let go of the pain of the past and embrace the new life God has in store for us today.

I shared with you the grief I felt at the tragic loss of my childhood friend. One of the ways that I have allowed God's resurrection spirit to breathe new life into my sorrow and loss

was to name one of my daughters – Kristie – in honor and memory of my lost friend. Rather than remembering her with sorrow and grief, I can now look at my daughter and see new life and new hope for tomorrow. I hope and pray that the spirit of my childhood friend Kristie, surrounds and blesses my daughter with all the laughter and love that we shared as children, and that she may experience many of life's blessings, that my friend unfortunately missed out on.

Are there past griefs that you have been unable to release that are holding you in the dark of a tomb? Are there places that you need to let go of your sorrow and heartbreak, long enough for God's healing love to rush in and bind up your brokenness, freeing your grief to rise in new hope and new life?! It is my prayer, on this day of Resurrection, that we might all find the strength and inspiration to catch our breath, to allow the life-giving good news of God's love to rise within us and lead us to a future of joy and hope, for us and for all. Amen.