

## **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.\*

## **What are You Looking for?** - April 17, 2022

*John 20:1-18*

That first Easter morning... what was it like? I imagine if the resurrection of Jesus were turned into a Hollywood epic, it would be done in full sound and CGI graphics. There would be rumbles as the stone rolled. There would be blaring trumpets and shining shafts of light. There would close up shots of Jesus removing the cloth encasing his body. We would certainly hear heavenly choirs and see each foot of the risen Lord plant itself on the ground as he then stands up. Jesus is alive.

Unfortunately for Hollywood, the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection didn't quite happen that way. In fact, there is no record in scripture of exactly what happened to him. In all four gospels, we don't learn how Jesus was resurrected. Instead, what happens in all the accounts is that followers of Jesus arrive at the tomb while it is still dark and find it open. Open, and empty.

What is ironic about his followers finding an empty tomb when they were searching for the dead body of their master and friend is that not one of the disciples: not Peter, not John, not Mary Magdalene thought for even a second that Jesus had been telling them the truth about his death and resurrection?

They had all heard Jesus say on many occasions that his ministry was controversial. They knew that the chief priests and scribes were very much against Jesus. They knew that Jesus encountered criticism repeatedly for what he was teaching and miracles he was performing.

They all heard Jesus say that at some point, all the people aligned against him would come together to arrest and kill him. Yes, Jesus predicted his death many times -- why weren't they listening? Moreover, Jesus was not only predicting his death, he also predicted something astonishing, something impossible. Jesus predicted that after he died, he would rise again to new life and he would do three days after his death. He said this not once but many times.

So here we are on Easter and we are here because we believe everything Jesus said about himself was true. He was arrested, just as he said. He was unjustly convicted, just as he said. He was killed by the people, just as he said. And he rose from the dead on the third day, just as he said.

But while we sing joyful songs of celebration, no such thing happened on the first Easter morning. While today we baptize, welcoming two children to our membership, nobody joined the church that day. While we boldly claim the resurrection of Jesus as the central pillar of our faith, the followers of Jesus had no clue as to what had just happened. All they had was a lot of questions.

Let's start with the first witness, Mary Magdalene. According to the scripture, Mary came to Jesus' tomb while it was still dark and saw it was opened. She did not look inside. Instead she assumed that the tomb was empty because someone had taken Jesus' body. She didn't know, she just assumed, and therefore ran away to tell Peter. It is interesting that Mary reacts this way. After all, she, of all people, should have known to take Jesus at his word. Jesus saved Mary from certain death by stoning by challenging her accusers to kill her but only if they were without sin. Mary heard Jesus praise her over her sister Martha for sitting down at Jesus' feet and listening to him teach. Most of all Mary was there when Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Mary certainly heard Jesus foretell his resurrection, but she could not believe it.

But is Mary's reaction really that surprising? Consider all she had been through during the past week. In just over seven days, she had gone from being criticized for anointing Jesus with expensive perfume to watching him triumphantly enter Jerusalem to spending his last supper with him to watching him get beaten to a pulp and suffering horribly on the cross. How many of us would be thinking straight after all that trauma? How many of us could consider anything but the apparent reality that Jesus was dead?

But friends, that which we call faith requires us to look past the supposed reality of our senses. It is easy to be like Mary and simply trust that what our senses tell us is true reality. When we are in crisis, when we are sad, when we are confused, we fall back on our senses because our minds are not prepared to entertain other ideas, strange ideas, impossible ideas. In short, Mary saw what she wanted to see when she visited the tomb. But don't we often see what we have been trained and conditioned to see in so much of our lives. Yes, she had been told by Jesus himself he would rise from the dead, but still how could it be?

Then, of course, there were Peter and John, Jesus' closest disciples. When Mary told them the stone had been rolled away, they both ran to see for themselves. John stopped at the entrance and saw Jesus' burial cloth. Peter actually went in the tomb. Then John followed. It was at that point that John realized that Jesus was alive, but apparently Peter wasn't sure. On the other hand, because John himself wrote the gospel, he certainly makes himself look good by claiming he was the first one to accept Jesus' resurrection as fact.

Nonetheless, neither John nor Peter approached the tomb with the rolled-away stone with an attitude of expectation. Neither of them felt a sense of relief, a sense of "yes, of course the tomb is open, that's what Jesus told us would happen." Both John and Peter were filled with caution. John didn't

want to go inside the tomb. Peter did go inside ahead of John, but even though he saw the tomb was empty except for the burial cloths, Peter did not quite understand what he was looking at.

Perhaps what Peter and John experience is in line with your own experiences with God. It is a very rare occasion when we can say definitively that we have had an encounter with God. We go through life most of the time not being sure whether the unexpected or miraculous events in our lives are mere coincidence or a genuine miracle. Most of us do have questions about certain occurrences in our lives that are just not explainable by logical means. Perhaps it is how we met our spouse, perhaps in how we found a job, perhaps how an illness was cured which probably should not have been. The gospel says that John finally believed, but only after he saw the empty tomb and the abandoned burial clothes. Peter wasn't sure, even after he saw the exact same thing John did.

And that is the thing about God which perhaps confuses, or infuriates, us so much. We can never be absolutely 100% certain that when we encounter the unexplainable in our lives, we are meeting God. For literally years, Jesus had predicted his arrest, trial, death, and yes, resurrection. The disciples had witnessed in person their master doing things and saying things no other human being had ever done. In their experience, the disciples never found Jesus to be wrong, never saw him make a mistake, never heard him get angry at God. In short Peter and John followed a man with a 1000 percent batting average. Yet they came to his empty tomb and still wondered whether Jesus was alive or not.

But can we blame them, really? The passage today goes onto say that Mary Magdeline herself did not believe until she saw and touched and heard the risen Christ. Peter had his doubts until Jesus presented himself in person. We know the story of Thomas who did not believe until he touched Jesus' wounds. Even in the gospel of Matthew, forty days after the resurrection, forty days after Jesus had made multiple appearances to his disciples and hundreds of others — even according to Matthew some doubted that the resurrected Jesus was for real.

How, therefore, how much harder it is for us living twenty centuries later, to accept this Easter story. Yes, if Jesus has risen from the dead it is certainly wonderful news. But the fact remains that I wasn't there and you weren't there and all we have as evidence are the pages of the Bible.

Where we stand today, Easter 2022, is this. Either we believe Jesus is alive, and Easter is real because others tell us it's true. Or, we believe Jesus is alive because we feel his presence in our hearts.

No question, many people are Christians, very devout Christians, because they were taught to believe and accept that on Easter Jesus came back from the dead. They look around the world and see the evidence of Jesus' resurrection is in a universal Church that refuses to die in spite of all the attempts over the years to kill it. They believe Jesus is alive because we can see, really can see, the evidence for life slowly getting better for humanity, despite endless setbacks and reversals. They believe Jesus is alive because of the presence of so many women and men over the years who have sacrificed everything including their lives to push the good news forward and help it reach every corner of the earth.

And there are indeed others, and if you are one of them do not be afraid. There are others who feel in their heart of hearts that Jesus Christ is truly alive because they have experience the risen Christ in their own lives. There are people, some of whom are in this room, who have encountered God in person and know that God exists and that God came to earth as a man called Jesus. They can point to incidents where they know that no other explanation exists except the existence of God. They see the presence of Christ, the transformation of lives, and know it has to be real.

And then, there are others, perhaps you are among them, who remain just like Peter. You see the evidence but at the end of the day, you just aren't sure. Maybe Jesus is alive. Maybe the resurrection is just the product of a lot of people who really, really, wanted the world to be like the one Jesus was proclaiming. What about them? What about those who aren't sure?

My friends, hear the good news and be at peace with yourself. On this Easter Sunday the Good News, the best news of all, is that even if you are questioning the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus is not questioning you. The fundamental truth of Easter is this: God so loved the world that God gave the only Son. Yes, the scripture goes on to say that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

Maybe you're not sure. Well, at the beginning, Mary, John, and Peter were not sure. Maybe you have questions. Well, Thomas had questions. Paul who came later had questions. Just about every saint or religious leader has had or does have questions. It is perfectly fine for you to have questions. In fact, it's great to have questions because questions are the start of faith.

Friends, on this Easter Sunday, I invite you to search, to doubt, to quest as Mary, John, and Peter did. Eventually, they all found their faith. They all found that Jesus loved them. They all were convinced the resurrection was real. Don't worry, Jesus will join you on your journey. And you will know the risen Lord.