

Reading for Easter Sunday, April 4th, 2021

John 20:1-18 (NIV)

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Sermon “I Have Seen The Lord!”

The author of the fourth gospel is a literary genius from beginning to end. His very first words allude to Genesis 1:1 with the phrase “In the beginning . . .” and today’s reading starts in a similar vein: “Early on the *first* day of the week, while it was *still* dark . . .”¹ suggesting that this is the beginning of the new creation, a new start, with light once again emerging from the darkness. This new start begins with the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, the first being Mary Magdalene. She comes to the garden tomb presumably to grieve, since John has already told us that Jesus was buried with spices and wrapped in strips of linen in accordance with the Jewish customs.² But to Mary’s shock and dismay, she sees that the stone over the tomb entrance had been rolled away, and instantly assumes that grave robbers have stolen the body of Jesus. This was sufficient enough of a social problem to warrant a Roman edict forbidding the practice! So Mary runs to Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved,³ and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have laid him.”⁴ There is a lot of running in this story (!), because Peter and the other disciple now run to the tomb. We are told this unnamed disciple gets there first, sees the linen wrappings inside, but doesn’t enter. When Peter arrives, he rushes straight in! The author then gives sufficient detail concerning the linen burial cloths to make it abundantly clear that the grave *wasn’t* robbed! Grave robbers would *not* have taken the time to unwrap and then carry away a naked body! Even so, there is more, in that there is a comparison being made here with John’s earlier account of the raising of Lazarus.⁵ Lazarus comes out of his tomb bound hand and foot with linen straps, whereas Jesus has left such wrappings inside the tomb indicating that this is *not* the same *kind* of event. The disciple whom Jesus loved sees this “and *believed*.”⁶ Precisely what he believes is a bit vague and perhaps incomplete, in that it is only later - when the Holy Spirit is given⁷ - will the community of disciples remember the scriptures and the earlier cryptic teachings of Jesus.⁸ Even so, the beloved disciple’s faith indicates that he believes the reason for the empty tomb is *good* news, *not* bad; that the winter is over and spring has arrived.

The narrative now moves back to Mary Magdalene, who is alone and crying by the empty tomb. She is curious enough to look inside, where she sees two angels – one at either end of where Jesus had been lying.⁹ Angels feature prominently in the other gospel’s accounts, but there *is* a difference. In the other

¹ John 20:1. (Light and darkness are frequently contrasted in John!)

² See John 19:39-41. Instrumental in this act was Nicodemus, from John 3, and Joseph of Arimathea.

³ Traditionally, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” is taken to be John, himself. See John 13:21-25; 18:15-18; 19:26-27, 21:7,20.

⁴ John 20:2. The “we” could imply Mary was not alone, or it is a literary “we” to represent all the followers of Jesus.

⁵ See John 11:44.

⁶ John 20:8b. The beloved disciple believed; there is nothing to indicate that Peter believed. It may be that John wished to emphasize *not* the failure of Peter to believe, but the extraordinary sensitivity of the other disciple stemming from his love of Jesus that enables him to believe. (Historically, too much has been made of an ecclesiastical hierarchy/competition between the two men from over-analyzing such texts!) Newbigin writes, “It is possible to believe without having seen (John 20:29), but such faith rests on the testimony of those who *have* seen *and* believed.”

⁷ John 20:22.

⁸ For example, John 7:33-36; 10:18.

⁹ John 20:11-12.

three gospels, the angels *announce* that *Jesus is risen* and gives the women a message to pass on to the disciples.¹⁰ Here, the angels simply ask Mary, “Why are you weeping?”¹¹ These angels are clearly *not* messengers, as such, but they *are* evidence of the in-breaking of the promised new age as a consequence of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The scene now changes to the conversation between Mary and the man she presumes to be the gardener.¹² John tells his readers that the man is, in fact, the risen Jesus but – for some unknown reason – Mary doesn’t recognize him. Curiously, Jesus asks her the same question as the angels, “Why are you weeping?” This seems odd; after all, Mary is right by an open tomb! I suggest that repeated question points *the reader* back to Jesus’ long discourse to his followers just prior to his death, where he says: “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn . . . but your pain will turn into joy. . . . You have pain now; but I *will* see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”¹³ The connection to weeping is evident, and John is subtly reminding *his readers* of the promised joy that is now about to be revealed to Mary.

The next question Jesus asks is “*Who* are you looking for?”¹⁴ Mary, thinking Jesus was the gardener, says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”¹⁵ Jesus simply says, “Mary!” and she instantly *knows* it is Jesus who is speaking to her and responds with the Aramaic term of endearment for “my teacher.” This is a beautiful and personal moment. Yet it echoes what John relates Jesus as saying earlier, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”¹⁶ Jesus says he calls his sheep *by name* and they respond because they know *his voice*. When Mary hears the voice of the shepherd, she knows who it is; there is *no* possibility of a mistaken identity. A few verses later in John 10, Jesus says, “I lay [my life] down of my own accord . . . and I *have authority to take it up again*.”¹⁷ John says that some people thought Jesus was deranged for saying such things,¹⁸ but “Look, here is the evidence,” implies John. Jesus is alive!

The risen Jesus then says to Mary, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father.”¹⁹ This can’t mean that Mary must not physically touch Jesus, after all, later on Jesus encourages [doubting] Thomas to touch his wounds in his hand and side.²⁰ Rather, Jesus doesn’t want Mary to linger too long in this special moment or, from sheer joy, to grasp Jesus and be unwilling to let him go, or to interfere with the unfolding events of the hour. Jesus then it states explicitly that he is *ascending* to the Father; in fact, Jesus says it *twice*.²¹ This is significant because John does *not* have an ascension

¹⁰ Mark 16:6-7; Matt 28:5-7; Luke 24:4-8. (Luke mentions *two* angels; signifying reliable witness/information.)

¹¹ John 20:13. (See also John 1:51.)

¹² Some scholars see this “gardener” as alluding to Jesus as a the “second Adam,” tending the garden in the new creation.

¹³ John 16:20-22. (Jesus also compares the pain to childbirth – the birthing of new life.)

¹⁴ John 20:15, cf. 1:38, This echoes Jesus’ earlier question to potential disciples, “What are you looking for?”

¹⁵ John 20:15.

¹⁶ John 10:14 (see also v3-4, 27); Isa 43:1.

¹⁷ John 10:17-18.

¹⁸ John 10:19-21.

¹⁹ John 20:17. See also Matt 28:9, where the women “clasp [Jesus]’ feet and worship him.”

²⁰ John 20:27.

²¹ John 20:17.

story at the end of his gospel. Yet there is no doubt in John's mind that the final stage of the glorification of Jesus is his ascension to be at the right hand of the father.²² For John, Jesus is *returning* to the Father since Jesus originally comes *from* the Father.²³ Jesus tells Mary, "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"²⁴ Note how the relationship has now changed and the way Jesus speaks of God is inclusive of his followers who have entered the kingdom *with* him; he speaks of "*my* Father and *your* Father; *my* God and *your* God."²⁵ The resurrection story continues – and the sheep who hear and respond to the good shepherd's voice are a part of the unfolding plot.²⁶ John concludes with Mary going back to the disciples and exclaiming, "I have *seen* the Lord!"²⁷ Mary came to the garden looking for the *dead* Jesus and she finds the *living Lord*! The darkness has gone, the Son is shining!

I have three observations or comments to make this morning:

First, the gospels of John and Luke report several eye-witness accounts to the resurrection; this story of Mary Magdalene is simply the first. What is clear from all of them is that *no one expected* Jesus to rise again from the dead. The Pharisees, like many Jews, believed the resurrection of the righteous would occur on the great Day of the LORD, in other words, *not before* the final judgement day. The bodily resurrection of Jesus was, then, a *surprise* even to his closest followers. Furthermore, there is no indication that these eye-witnesses were gullible, or deluded, or inventing a fantasy for some reason. Nor were they having a purely mystical, spiritual, or other-worldly experience; if they were, the Old Testament prophets provide plenty of examples as to how to articulate such visionary occurrences. Instead, the gospel writers seem to be trying to articulate these distinctive encounters and are struggling to find the right language for a *new* phenomenon. The risen Jesus is no ghost or spirit, the Greek language has words for that; Jesus' body has somehow been transformed.²⁸ Moreover, both John and Luke present post-resurrection narratives in which the risen Jesus was *not* recognized at first. And the first encounters, either with angels or the risen Jesus, were with *women*, and the cultural reality is that - in those times - women were not recognized as credible witnesses. Nevertheless, the gospel writers stick to the known historical facts, even if it would have been more persuasive to their readers to present men as the authenticators of this event. Put differently, *if* they were fabricating the resurrection story, they would have written it very differently. Regardless of the differences in the gospel accounts, the followers of Jesus were convinced Jesus had been raised from the dead. No one disputes the tomb was empty. And it would be arrogant for us to simply dismiss these accounts of the

²² Recall that John has a three-stage glorification of Jesus: his being *lifted up* on the cross, his being *raised* from the dead, and his *ascension* to God the Father.

²³ John 1:1, 14; 3:16-17.

²⁴ John 20:17.

²⁵ See also John 15:15 – some have noted the "my brothers" descriptor as significant (i.e., not "my disciples.")

²⁶ See John 14:23; 15:8–11, 16; 16:23–27; 17:20–22.

²⁷ John 20:18. (John does not record their response!)

²⁸ This becomes clearer in John 20:19-29; Luke 24:13-49. See also 1 Cor 15;

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf> .

resurrection appearances. It would reveal more about *our own* biases and assumptions rather than say something factual about 1st century culture. The risen Jesus was *never* socially, politically, or intellectually *neutral*, then or now. If the Creator God is at work in the world, we need to be open to possible surprises as to how he reveals his activities. We therefore need to be careful *not* to handcuff God by our own preconceived ideas. I believe something *really* happened that first Sunday, something *radically* new. I have come to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

My second observation is that the risen Jesus reveals himself to individuals in very personal ways. Mary's experience is very different from that of Thomas' or Peter's, for example. I think we can each take heart from that. The tomb *is* empty; Christ *is* risen. But how you and I encounter the risen Jesus today will be personal and different, yet profoundly real and life-changing. For some people, like for the disciple that Jesus loved, the details of the empty tomb and the position of the burial clothes are enough because they have already loved Jesus for some time. This love may be because a person is already captivated by Jesus' teaching, example, and life. For others, the evidence may be more intellectual, not forgetting that science is actually impotent at denying the possibility of such a one-off event. For others still, their encounter is an intense emotional connection – like for Mary. When Jesus calls your name - and you know it is him calling - you willingly follow him. *Whatever* the format of the encounter, may we - through the eyes of faith - be able to proclaim along with Mary, "I have *seen* the Lord!" I simply encourage each of us to be open-minded and open-hearted.

My final point today is that the early church *didn't* then go around preaching that the resurrection shows that there is "life after death." Few Jews doubted that. Their message was much more *this* worldly. God's raising of Jesus from the dead demonstrated that Jesus *was indeed* the Messiah, God's Chosen One. He is the rightful king of the whole world and therefore his followers had a job to do, namely to act as heralds of King Jesus announcing that fact to all who would listen.²⁹ The essential conclusion of the gospels is that: "Jesus is risen, therefore the new creation has begun, God's kingdom has begun, and so everyone is invited not only to be beneficiaries of that new world but participants in making it happen. There is work to be done, so let's get on with it! Christ is risen indeed! Halleluiah. Amen.

²⁹ That journey is portrayed in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, beginning with the Holy Spirit coming in power at Pentecost.