

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

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. [2] 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." [3] Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. [4] The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, [7] and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. [8] Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples returned to their homes.

[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; [12] 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. [13] 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." [14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] 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." [16] Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). [17] 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.'" [18] 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.

TEMPORARY BLINDNESS

All of us guys have done this before. Our wife tells us to get some ketchup out of the fridge. So we look in the fridge where the ketchup is usually placed and yell back, “Honey, I can’t see any ketchup. I guess we’re out.”

And she mutters under her breath, briskly walks over to the fridge, pulls out the ketchup with an air of disdain and says, “If had been a snake it would have bit you.”

And in defense of your temporary blindness you say, “But, I didn’t see it. It wasn’t where I expected it to be.” That excuse never works, but we always give it.

Isn't it funny how if something is not where we expect to be, we assume that it's not there? We have selective vision. We often see what we expect to see and no more.

A man was in an accident near his home. It wasn't too serious, but his car was broadsided by another car coming down the street.

He said,

“I looked down that street just before I pulled out of the driveway, and there was nothing coming down the street ... nothing! I go down that street a dozen times a week and there hardly ever any cars on that street. I looked. There was not a car in sight.

Well, there must have been one car in sight. Perhaps this man only saw what he was accustomed to seeing (an empty street) instead of what was really there, a car.

Vision failure is not always due to a need for glasses. Sometimes our vision fails us because our expectations prevent us from seeing what is really there.

Today's story is about that kind of vision failure. Mary and the disciples cannot “see” what is really going on because of their assumptions about reality.

How does the voice put it on Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride?
“Dead men tell no tales.”

And dead men certainly don't get up and walk away from their tomb!

If the tomb is empty, someone has moved the body.
That's what Mary believes, and that's what Mary sees.

AN EMPTY TOMB

Mary came to the tomb early on the first day of the week and found the heavy stone that guarded the entrance to the tomb rolled away. She didn't look inside at this point. She just ran to tell the Peter and John about what she had seen and her assumption about what she had seen.

She said,
"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Peter and John come running to check out what she has said. Since John is younger he wins the foot race to the tomb and peeks inside. He sees linen cloths lying there but is hesitant to enter.

The impulsive Peter never hesitates. Huffing and puffing he jumps right into the tomb through the little access opening. It is just big enough for a man to wriggle through. That leads him to the burial chamber where what he sees seems to confirm Mary's initial evaluation.

He finds grave clothes neatly folded, but he does not find the body of Jesus. John follows Peter into the burial chamber, takes one look at the evidence and believes. What does he believe? He believes what Mary believes, that the body of Jesus has been taken.

Peter and John leave. They came. They saw. They went home.

The empty tomb was not a vision of hope. It was the final insult. Not only had their Master been brutally and unjustly killed; now his body had been stolen as well.

There are some who say that the accounts of the resurrection were in essence wishful thinking. They were stories told by men and women who saw what

they wanted to see, and who believed what they wanted to believe. They wanted to believe that Jesus rose from the dead so they saw visions of that very thing.

This passage seems to suggest the opposite is true. In John's account the disciples don't say, "Oh my goodness, the tomb is empty. Jesus must have risen as he said." No, they just go home.

BITTER TEARS

But, Mary stays. She stays to weep bitter tears at the grave site. There is no body. There is no way to pay her final respects. She sees nothing but a total tragedy. She weeps as one who has no hope.

I wonder what caused Mary to look into the tomb one more time. Peter and John had already checked it out. They had confirmed her fears. The body was gone.

Sometimes when we get bad news we just can't believe it. We have to see for ourselves. Maybe that was it. She just had to see for herself.

But, she is surprised by what she sees when she peeks into the tomb. The tomb is not empty. Two angels dressed in white sit where Jesus' body had been laid. Once again Mary has a vision problem. She doesn't seem to recognize that they are angels.

They ask Mary, "Why do you weep?" And she replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."

I always wondered why Mary didn't say something like, "Who are you guys and how did you get in there without me seeing you?"

But, Mary is only concerned with one question at this point. What have they done with the body of Jesus? There are angels in that place, and Mary can't see them. Her vision is clouded by despair.

But, according to our story, she is now visited by one who will surely change all that. As she turns away from the angelic beings in the tomb, she comes face to face with Jesus, and she doesn't recognize him either.

Commentator William Barclay suggests that Mary cannot tell that is Jesus because her eyes are so full of tears. That's certainly possible. Mary was doing a lot of crying that day.

And so Jesus asks her the same question that the angels asked, "Woman why are you crying?" And he asks a second question, "Who are you looking for?"

Mary, of course, is still looking for a dead man, and that assumption guides her conversation. She assumes that this figure standing before her is the gardener. Maybe he might know what has happened to the body of Jesus. And so she says,

"Mister, if you took him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him."

CALLED BY NAME

And that's when it happened. Jesus called her by name. He said, "Mary." And her eyes were opened, and she recognized him.

What opened Mary's eyes? What allowed her to see what she could not see before?

It was the risen Christ calling her name.
That made all the difference.

What would it take for us to see and believe? What would it take for us to have our eyes opened to the hope of the resurrection? What would it take to keep us from grieving as those who had no hope?

Faith in the resurrection is not blind faith. There are quite a few factors that might lead us to believe that resurrection is one possible explanation for what happened long ago.

The tomb was empty. No one was ever able to produce Jesus' dead body.

The disciples were transformed from cowardly runaways to bold witnesses to the resurrection. If they knew that Jesus had not been raised, why would they give their lives going all over the world telling the people that this was true?

Even if you don't believe in the resurrection, these facts would make us pause and wonder what might have happened so long ago.

We could, of course give a number of alternative explanations for each of these facts. And since the resurrection is a unique event in the history of the world, those alternative explanations might seem to be more reasonable.

Maybe someone did steal the body. Maybe the disciples just saw what they wanted to see. Like Mary most of us are not ready to believe in the resurrection just because there is an empty tomb. The resurrection is too unique an event to believe on the basis of circumstantial evidence, even strong circumstantial evidence that would hold up in a court of law. We would need something more in order to believe a tale like this.

So what would it take to make us believe?

Suppose Jesus called us by name as he did Mary? Suppose we had a personal encounter with the risen Christ? Would that make a difference in what we were able to see and believe?

The earliest account of the resurrection comes to us through Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In that letter, Paul said that the risen Christ appeared first to Peter, then to the twelve and then to others. As many as five hundred people saw the risen Christ at one time.

And then, Paul says, the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Christ called Paul by name, and that changed everything. The greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest proponent. (I Corinthians 15:3-10)

In other words, in addition to Mary, there were many who heard their name called by the risen Christ. And when that happened, those people were transformed. Many of them literally died for what they believed.

STILL CALLS OUR NAME

Perhaps if we heard the risen Christ calling our name our eyes would also be opened. Perhaps we too would have a vision. Maybe we too could have hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

I believe that is still possible. The Spirit of the risen Christ is still putting in appearances and changing lives.

Down through the ages people have been radically transformed when they heard the voice of Christ calling their name. It may have been a dramatic thing, like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

Or it might have been a more subtle thing, like when an Oxford scholar, an atheist by the name of C.S. Lewis set out to debunk the Christian faith.

It didn't work out that way. He became a believer instead. He wrote the still popular book, *Mere Christianity* and is considered to be one of the greatest Christian writers of the twentieth century.

Lewis said that he had no earthshaking experience. He was an unbeliever in the morning and by the evening he found himself believing those things that he had denounced for so many years.

When the risen Christ calls us by name, we see things differently. Many of us here today know that this is true.

Some of us were prodigal sons and daughters, looking for love in all the wrong places. And then one day we came to our senses and found that God was waiting for us all along. Some of us may have been adamantly opposed to the Christian faith, and then one day we heard the voice of Christ calling us, and we were changed by the experience.

Some of us didn't think about what we believed until one day tragedy came into our lives. And in desperation we reached out into that emptiness and found that we had already been touched by the One who knew our pain.

Maybe we grew up in the church and never knew a time when we did not believe. It was a part of who we were as members of a household of faith.

To put it another way, there are many ways that Jesus still calls our name. But, this is certain. He does call our name. The question is this: are we listening?

SEEING FACE TO FACE

Most of our lives we are like Mary. We go through life blindly, unaware of the importance of the events that surround us.

As the Apostle Paul put it, we “see through a glass darkly.” (I Corinthians 13:12) In other words, our perception of the world is distorted by our mortality. The glory of God and the hope of resurrection seem unreal and far away.

But, occasionally, by the grace of God, the veil is lifted, and we are able to see more clearly. We hear a voice calling our name. We are able to focus and see the glory of God face to face.

One day that won't be an uncommon occurrence.
One day the voice of Jesus will be clearly heard.

But, until that day we have this word of hope. The risen Christ goes on ahead of us. The risen Christ leads us to tell others of this unbelievably good news. The story does not end with death. There is more to come.

HANGING ON TO THE OLD JESUS

There's something else in our story for today that we need to note. When Jesus spoke Mary's name and she recognized him, she wrapped her arms around him and wouldn't let go. This, of course, seems like a normal reaction.

We see that same kind of behavior whenever someone escapes from a dangerous situation. It's like those reunions when soldiers come home from the war zone, and it seems like their wives can't hug them enough.

But, according to Jesus, Mary needed to quit clinging to him.

What we long for is dead and gone. Easter doesn't change that. We can't cling to Jesus hoping that he will take us back to the way it was. The only way out of the mess we find ourselves in is the way forward, and it is Jesus who will once again be our guide.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus was just the first act in a multi-act play. There was more to come for Jesus and for Mary. Jesus was not just the old teacher who roamed the hills of Galilee. He was the risen Christ who was calling people to go into the whole world with this incredible message of hope for life eternal.

There were people to tell, places to go and things to do.
No clinging allowed in the new world of resurrection hope!

And so it is with us. Jesus will not be encumbered by our expectations of him, our desire to cling to him and keep him in one place. The risen Christ always leads us forward. He always challenges us to let go of the past and embrace the future, even when that future seems uncertain and filled with danger.

I'm not entirely sure what Jesus meant when he told Mary, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." But, maybe he meant that we can never cling to the Holy. We cannot hold onto or master the righteous of God as revealed in Jesus, that message will always be above and beyond us. God's ways are not our ways.

It is a disappointment, this command that Jesus gives Mary (and I think us as well).

Craig Barnes in a sermon on this passage wrote,

“We get the feeling that Mary was never the same after Easter. Neither is anyone who has learned that what matters is not that we are confident in our hold on Jesus but that we are confident in his hold on us.”

If we can “see” that, then we’ll be ready for anything. We who were blind to the power of God’s salvation will now live in the light of eternal hope. We will no longer have vision failure. We will have eyes to see the glory of the Lord.

In the light of the resurrection there can be no going back to the dark days of the past. Death could not hold her prey, and we are not bound by the dark days of our past either.

Now the risen Christ is loose, loose in the world. He is loose in our world, and he is calling our name.

Quit clinging to a past that is dead and gone, and start proclaiming a message that is eternal in the heavens.

He is risen! [congregational participation]
He is risen indeed!

Amen.