

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. 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.

20:11 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.

THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

Easter is on the first day of the week. John stresses this twice, in verse 1 and verse 19 of the twentieth chapter. Is this important? Is there some meaning to the fact that this occurs on the first day of the week and not on the Sabbath?

I view this passage through the lens of something that the Apostle Paul once wrote. He wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians,

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

In the week that precedes Easter, Jesus is crucified, dead and buried. The old has passed away.

There were signs that Jesus might be the Messiah. His miracles led people to believe that He might be the One. The disciples hoped that Jesus might be the One.

Nevertheless all those hopes were dashed by the reality of the cross. He was crucified, dead, and buried. The old had truly passed away.

But, now it is the first day of the week. And it is not just the beginning of a new week. It is the first day of a whole new world.

The first day of the week signals the beginning of God’s new creation.

NEW CREATION

You’ll notice that when Mary first sees Jesus, she thinks that He is the gardener. She is mistaken, but in a way it’s the right mistake to make. Jesus is the Gardener with a capital “G.”

Jesus is the new Adam. Like the first man Jesus is charged with bringing God’s new world to order. Jesus is replanting the Garden of Eden.

He is the one who fulfills the vision of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah said that when God speaks things happen.

The mountains sing. The trees of the field clap their hands. The thorns and thistles of the world are replaced with myrtle and cypress. (Isaiah 55:11-13)

That’s what Jesus is doing. He is restoring God’s good creation. This truly will be a new day.

But, Mary did not see this new day coming. (Indeed, no one saw this new day coming.) It was still dark when Mary came to the tomb. The glory of God’s new day had not yet dawned.

And yet even in the darkness there were signs that this would be no ordinary day.

When Mary came to the tomb, the stone that covered the tomb had been removed. The heavy barrier that separated life from death had not only been rolled away; in John's gospel it had been taken away.

The word literally means, "to raise up from the ground". God had already done the heavy lifting. Something big had happened. But, Mary didn't understand what it could be.

GRAVE ROBBERS!

She ran to tell Peter and the other "disciple that Jesus loved" her interpretation, grave robbers. She said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Jesus talked to his disciples about resurrection on numerous occasions, but they didn't really understand. How could they? Their minds were constricted by their worldview, by what they thought was possible. Resurrection was not in their vocabulary.

Even after seeing Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead the disciples were not convinced. Jesus raised Lazarus, but who could raise Jesus? Despite the miracle of a resuscitated corpse by the name of Lazarus, the disciples were not quick to believe in the resurrection.

The barrier between death and life is not easily removed. Someone must have taken the stone away and removed the body. It was the only logical explanation.

THEY RAN

And yet, Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb. In fact it almost sounds like they had a foot race. And the "other disciple" beat Peter out by a nose.

Why did they do that? Why did they run?

We can't be sure, but maybe they were starting to believe. What they believed was not quite formed, but maybe they were starting to get an inkling that something grand had happened. Somehow God was at work in this strange turn of events, and they could not wait to see for themselves.

The other, faster disciple got the first glimpse. He saw linen wrappings lying in a pile.

When Peter arrived, he didn't hesitate. He went right in and the other disciple followed. They saw the linen wrappings that had covered the body of Jesus, and they also saw the cloth that had been on Jesus' head rolled up neatly in a place by itself.

Why would a grave robber go to the trouble of undressing Jesus? Why was the cloth that was on Jesus' head in a place by itself? And why would someone go to the trouble of rolling it up?

But, the disciples did not ask those questions.

The Bible does tell us that when the "other disciple" came into the tomb he saw and he believed, but we're not sure what he believed. We just know that neither he nor Peter suspected that there had been a resurrection. Verse 9 reads, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

Maybe he just believed the testimony of Mary, that someone had taken the body away.

THEY WENT HOME

Faith in a new creation would not come easily for these disciples. It would take more than an empty tomb for them to believe in resurrection. It would take an encounter with the risen Christ.

Peter and the other disciple 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.

WHY ARE YOU CRYING?

But, Mary apparently followed the disciples back to the tomb, and after they leave she decides to stay. She stands outside the tomb weeping.

And as she weeps she bends over and looks into the tomb, but now the tomb is not empty. There are two angels in the tomb. And the angels ask Mary, "Why are you weeping?"

Mary responds, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

In this case there is no need for the angels to say anything. No one has taken her Lord. In fact her Lord is right behind her.

When Mary turns she sees him, but she does not recognize Jesus. She thinks that he is the gardener.

And of course the obvious question is this: Why didn't Mary recognize Jesus? Was the sun in her eyes? Did the tears block her from seeing him clearly?

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."

HE CALLS HER NAME

It was at this point that Jesus called her by name. He said, "Mary" and she said "Teacher" and fell at his feet.

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 in the resurrection.

For example, the tomb was empty. And 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?

But, what if Jesus called us by name as he did Mary? Suppose we had a personal encounter with the risen Christ? I think that would clinch it. Today's lesson suggests that such an encounter is possible.

THE FLESH BECOMES WORD

John's gospel begins by saying that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God himself is with us in the person of Jesus.

Now the process is reversed. The Flesh is becoming Word.

Let me explain what I mean. When we say Jesus rose from the dead we're *not* saying that Jesus was merely a resuscitated corpse. Jesus had a new kind of physical body. He had a resurrection body.

The tomb was empty because the flesh of Jesus' original body has now been raised in a new and mysterious way. His body was a new creation with properties that nobody had expected. As a small seed can produce a beautiful flowering plant, so the body of Christ had been raised to be the flower of a new creation. (See 1 Corinthians 15:35-49)

Lest you think I've gone off the deep end, I would point you back to the text for today. When Mary attempted to cling to Jesus, Jesus replied, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

We don't know exactly what that means but it seems to say that the risen Jesus is different. You can't hold on to this Jesus.

This Jesus goes on ahead of us. This Jesus is ascending to his Father and our Father. This Jesus is ascending to God. The Flesh is becoming Word. (John 18:17)

THE FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION

Just as God sparked the creation of the universe with a single Word so God is recreating the universe through his Son, Jesus. The Flesh is becoming Word. The kingdom of God has come to earth. And things are beginning to change in a really big way.

The new creation has begun.

According to Paul Jesus is the "firstborn of all creation." In Jesus the "fullness of God" dwells and through him "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:15-20)

You see the resurrection of Jesus is much more important than a word of personal comfort. Yes, Jesus gives us hope for eternal life. But, those who follow Jesus can't just hold on to the resurrection like a drowning man might hold on to a life preserver.

Jesus is not just our ticket to heaven.

Jesus shows us the way, the truth and the life. Jesus has a job for us to do here and now. The risen Christ bids us to quit holding on to our past and follow him in a new and exciting journey.

Mary had to turn loose of the old Jesus so that she could go and tell others what she had seen. The tomb was empty but the world was going to be filled with the glory of God's power and grace. A resurrected Jesus is afoot. And that changed everything.

The Flesh has become Word.

Jesus has outgrown the tomb. The risen one has people to see and things to do. Jesus can now be found among the living.

When you think about it, no one ever believed because of an empty tomb. An empty tomb was just a big mystery, a giant question mark.

Who moved the stone? Why were the grave clothes left behind?

Mary had her explanation, grave robbers. According to Matthew, the religious authorities suggested that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body and then concocted some crazy story about resurrection.

An empty tomb proves nothing.
And Easter does not begin with the empty tomb.

HE CALLS THE DISCIPLES

Easter begins when the gardener says, "Mary!" and she recognizes that the man right behind her is Jesus.

But, this Jesus was so much more than she could imagine, more than any of us can imagine. This is where the miracle happened. And this is where the miracle continues to happen, not in the tomb but in our encounter with the risen Lord.

The risen Jesus appears four more times in the gospel of John. Jesus challenges his frightened, faithless followers to come out from behind the locked doors of their upper room and proclaim the good news.

But, the disciples don't want to do that.

So Jesus blows down their locked doors with the wind of His Spirit, and he sends them (sometimes kicking and screaming) into the world with his message of hope.

Their encounter with the risen Jesus changes them. Flesh was becoming Word.

And that process continues.

HE CALLS OUR NAME

The Spirit of the risen Christ is still changing lives.

Down through the ages people have been radically transformed when they heard the voice of Christ calling their name.

It can be dramatic, like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Or it can be more subtle 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.

TURNING LOOSE OF THE OLD JESUS

In some ways this is not my favorite Easter story. Sometimes I wish Jesus hadn't told Mary to quit holding on to him.

If I were writing this story I would have Jesus give her a long tearful hug and say, "We're getting out of here. We're going home."

But, Jesus doesn't say that. Jesus says, "Don't cling to me." And Jesus tells us the same thing.

You can't cling to God's love. You can only share it. God's love is always seeking to expand into ever widening circles of compassion.

We can't cling to the hope that Jesus will take us back to the way it was. The risen Christ is still prodding us to turn loose and move forward.

A new Day, a New Creation is coming. He goes ahead of us. And we have to catch up to Jesus.

You see things never did return to "normal" after that first Easter, not for the disciples and not for us.

After you see a risen Savior there is no normal.

The Flesh has become Word.

There's a Savior on the loose in our world, and He knows our name.

Amen.