

Easter Expectations

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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.

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.

MARY MAGDALENE

One person appears in all the resurrection stories in the Bible, Mary Magdalene.

We know two things about Mary Magdalene.

Jesus cured her of demon possession.

(She had seven demons all told. Seems like quite a lot to me.)

And she, along with some other prominent women traveled with Jesus and contributed to his ministry out of her own resources. (Luke 8:2-3)

There's so much more I would like to know about Mary Magdalene.

What were her demons?

Where did she get her money?

Why did she decide to follow Jesus?

We don't know the answers to any of those questions.

And I guess in the final analysis the answers to those questions are not that important in comparison to what we do know about her.

This is what we do know about her.

The story of Easter always begins with Mary Magdalene.

She comes to the tomb on the first day of the week.

And it is always dark.

John's gospel doesn't tell us why Mary came to the tomb in the dark.

Was it a way to express her grief?
Had she tossed and turned the night before and just wanted to get close to Jesus, even though he was gone?

Perhaps the demons were back.
Demons do have a way of coming back at times like this.
You and I both know it's true.

A SHOCKING DISCOVERY

But, when Mary finally made it to the tomb in the dark, she was shocked by what she saw.
The stone that sealed the tomb of Jesus was gone.
This was certainly NOT what she expected to see.

So, how did Mary respond to this surprise?
She ran.

She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple that Jesus loved and said,
“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,
and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Simon and the other disciple race to see for themselves.
The beloved disciple arrives first and peers into the tomb.
He sees the grave clothes lying in the tomb, but he does not go in.

Peter arrives a few seconds later and without hesitation barges right into the tomb.
He too sees the grave clothes lying there, but he sees more.
The cloth that was on Jesus' head was rolled up apart from the other wrappings.

Odd.
Why would have robbers bother to take off the grave clothes?

Maybe Peter said,
“Hey, come in here.
You've got to see this for yourself.”

And then, the other disciple also enters the tomb.

It was hard to believe, but it was true.

The body was gone.
But, the grave clothes were left behind.

Very, very odd.

The Bible says that the other disciple that Jesus loved saw and believed.

Don't misunderstand

This doesn't mean he came to faith in the resurrection.
The Scripture makes this clear.

At this point no one really understood what had happened.

Resurrection was not on the other disciple's radar.

This other disciple simply believed that the body of Jesus was gone,
and that his grave clothes were left behind.

He believed that this was a profoundly disturbing mystery.

And so Peter and the other disciple went home.

That's how the story goes for Peter and the other disciple.

They came.
They saw.
They went home.

End of story.

STANDING WEEPING

But, Mary stayed.
For Mary, this was more than just a mystery.
This was a great tragedy.

The Bible said she stood weeping.

She was filled with grief and had no where to go.

So she stood there ... weeping.

I do not picture a woman crying quietly.
No, this is the kind of crying that convulses the body and the soul.

It is the grief of one who has no hope.

I wonder how long she stood there?
Grief has a way of making time stand still.
You know what I mean.

But, finally, as she cried,
Mary bent over and peeked into the tomb.

Maybe she needed to see the empty tomb and the grave clothes for herself.

ANGELS

But, unlike the other disciples she didn't see grave clothes.
Through the fog of her tears, she saw angels, two of them in fact.

They were sitting where the body of Jesus had been,
one at where his head had lain,
and one at where his feet had lain.

And these angels ask Mary a question,
"Woman, why are you weeping?"

Mary says,
"They have taken away my Lord,
and I don't know where they have laid him."

Mary did not expect a resurrection.

There is no element of wishful thinking in this story.
In fact she even mistook angels for grave robbers!

Mary was still looking for the dead body of a man she loved.

JESUS

At this point Mary felt the presence of someone behind her.

She turned around and saw a man.

And the man asked the same question,

“Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you looking for?”

It was Jesus.

But, she doesn't break into song.

She doesn't sing, “There he is right before my eyes.”

No, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus.

Why? Why doesn't she recognize Jesus?

Mary is still looking for a dead man.

And this man is very much alive.

She assumes is the gardener, and she tells him,

“If you've taken him away,
tell me where you've laid him.
I will take him away.”

The man calls her name.

“Mary!”

And that's when Mary's eyes are opened, and she recognizes him.

“Teacher!”

HOLDING ON VERSUS GOING ON

Mary apparently tried to hold on to Jesus because Jesus said,

“Don't hold on to me.

I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

The risen Christ is not someone we can hold on to.
The risen Christ goes ahead of us to prepare the way.

He ascends into heaven.

But, we can do what Mary did.

We can tell others what we have seen
We can tell others about our experience of the Lord.

Mary ran and breathlessly told the disciples the amazingly good news,

“I have seen the Lord.”

EASTER EXPECTATIONS

Mary expected to see a sealed tomb that first Easter.
But, instead she saw the risen Christ.
Easter was more than she expected.

And Easter is more than what we expect as well.

What are your expectations of this Easter Sunday?
We have many expectations of Easter.

We expect to hear the story of the empty tomb.
Check. Story told.

We expect to hear special music.
Check. Music played. More to come.

We expect to eat a meal with family and friends.
Soon to be checked, for most of us.

We expect an Easter egg hunt for the kids.
Right after our service. Check.

We expect to see a plethora of lilies.

Check plus, thanks to the funeral home.

We expect to see fancy clothes.
Check. For some of us anyway.

EXPECTING RESURRECTION

But, do we expect resurrection?

Do we expect an encounter with the risen Christ?
Do we expect to hear our name called by the Lord?

After all, that's what Easter is all about ...resurrection. Right?

But, oddly enough, that's the one thing we don't expect.

It still catches us by surprise.

We think of resurrection as something that happened way back when,
not something that happens here and now.

It's Easter.
But, we do not expect resurrection.

We just expect to make our yearly trip to the empty tomb and say,

"My that was quite the story."

And then with Peter and the other disciple, we make our way back home.

But, the story doesn't stop at the tomb,
not for Mary and not for us.

We need to expect more from Easter.
But, exactly what should we expect?

How does the resurrection affect you and me today?

A TOMB IN A GARDEN

In John's gospel there is an unusual detail about the burial of Jesus that is not found in the other gospels. Jesus was buried in a garden, a garden near the place where He was crucified.

(You'll remember that when Mary first encountered the risen Christ, she thought he was the gardener. This is probably why. It would seem only natural to encounter the gardener in the garden!)

There was a new tomb in that garden, a tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

And that's where they put the body of Jesus.

What does this mean?

Why does John include this detail?

I wonder if John wants us to think about the garden of creation, and the garden of the new creation.

The tomb was in a garden, the place of new life.
Death and new life come together in the garden.

And new life, eternal life wins.

In a way, when Mary assumes that the risen Christ is the gardener, she is on the right track.

After all Jesus did talk about the resurrection in gardening terms.

He said,

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

The Good Gardener has returned.
And the harvest is about to begin.
It will bear much fruit.

But, first the disciples need to understand what is really going on.

NAME CALLING

How does the Good Gardener accomplish this harvest?

He accomplishes it by calling our name.

When Jesus called Mary's name everything changed. She went from standing and crying over her loss to running and telling the good news.

And when the risen Christ calls our name we too are changed.

Tom Long told a story about a little girl named Mary Ann. The little girl had a disfigured face.

And in addition to this her feet were also deformed so that she had to walk in an awkward way.

Of course when she reached school age, the other children were quite cruel in the way they talked to her.

They called her names.

They asked:

"How come you walk like a duck?"

"Why do you look like that?"

It got worse and worse.

Her world was dark ... and sad.

Then one year the little girl's teacher was required by the school board to administer a kind of homespun hearing test.

The teacher would call each student up to the desk, have the student cover first one ear and then the other.

And then the teacher would whisper a simple phrase like,

"The sky is blue." or "You have new shoes today."

The little girl dreaded the test because in addition to her other problems she was also almost deaf in one ear. This would be yet another time when she would be singled out and ridiculed.

When the day of the test came the little girl shuffled forward.

And the kind teacher whispered in her good ear,
“I wish you were my little girl, Mary Ann.”

Mary Ann’s whole life changed that day.
And Mary Ann grew up to be a teacher.
She was the best teacher ever.
All her students loved her.

Why?

Because someone called her name out of love and grace.

Jesus called Mary’s name, and that made all the difference. The demons in her life were banished for good.

I HAVE SEEN THE LORD

Could it really be that simple?
Can calling a person’s name out of grace and love change their whole life?

Could it be that in the dark places of our life there is a Savior lurking behind us?

Could it be that he is ready to call our name?

Could it be that new life is just around the corner?

According to Mary, the answer to all those questions is “yes.”

Why?

Because “I have seen the Lord!”

Think of it this way:

If it’s true,

If she has seen the Lord,

then the Lord is alive and “on the loose” in the world.

The Lord is not confined to the past.
He is with us here and now.
And that changes everything.

There is more to resurrection than just the anomaly of a dead man coming to life.
Resurrection is about the whole world being changed by the power of God’s grace.

In that world each moment is bursting with hope and expectation.

What should we expect of Easter?

We should expect to be surprised by the grace of God.

We should expect to be transformed by the hope of new life, life that is eternal.

The Lord is right behind us.
He calls us by name.

And the story we thought was over ... goes on forever.

That’s what we expect this Easter.
And we will not be disappointed.

“I have seen the Lord.”