



Recognizing the Resurrected Lord

John 20:1-18

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Again, good morning! It is a joy to be gathered with you on this Easter Sunday!

It's hard to imagine, but this is our first in-person Easter gathering since 2019. It is truly a joy to be in this sacred and holy space with you today, even as we continue to share in worship with many who are gathered online (both near and far from Alexandria). In one voice, united by the Spirit, we can proclaim, "Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed!"

The Easter story is both life-giving and instructional for all who proclaim and worship the resurrected Lord. Let us who have ears to hear once more remember the witness of God's glory as life overcomes death.

It was pre-dawn on a Sunday morning, perhaps with a chill still in the air as the sun had not quite crested the horizon. John's gospel account remembers that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus had been laid just three days prior. One might imagine why she was there: visiting as many of us do the burial grounds of loved ones past. The Sabbath day was over; it was her first real chance to go and visit the tomb; she had finally built up the emotional fortitude to put herself in the presence of Jesus' crucified body.

As she approached the tomb – a cavernous well sealed by a large stone slab – she could see (by what little light had begun to disperse through the branches of the surrounding trees) that the stone had been removed from the entrance to the tomb. She did not investigate, nor did she draw close enough to see into the open tomb; instead, she turned and ran, fleeing the scene of what she believed to be a grave robbed of its deceased.

She ran until she found Peter and the other disciple, defined in this text as “the one whom Jesus loved,” and she said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Though the text doesn’t offer his name explicitly, the disciple whom Jesus loved is John. This is a recurring descriptor that John used to define himself in his gospel text.

Upon hearing this troubling news, Peter and John immediately started running toward the tomb. They were running together at first, but John picked up speed and beat Peter to the tomb. It’s an interesting flex if you ask me, John including in this text that he had indeed beat Peter in the footrace.

The text offers that when John got to the open tomb, he knelt at the entrance, observing what he could see from the outside. Perhaps the sun had finally risen providing enough light to sufficiently see the contents of the tomb. John noticed the linens that had been used to wrap Jesus’ body were lying on the ground. As Peter caught up to John, Peter went *into* the tomb to observe more closely. He too saw the burial linens lying there, and he noticed that the linen that had covered Jesus’ head had been rolled up and was lying more neatly in place by itself.

After Peter entered, John also entered, seeing the linens more closely as Peter did. Only, as the text is written, when John saw, it was evidence enough for belief. Again, an interesting flex over Peter – John saw and believed, but Peter is not described as having believed.

The scholar Gerard Sloyan invites us to consider, what exactly did John believe?¹ Did John believe in Jesus as the resurrected Lord? Or, did John believe what Mary had said, that Jesus’ body had been taken by grave robbers? Even in John’s own account of this story, it says plainly, “the two disciples did not as of yet understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.” It’s hard to imagine that John believed Jesus to have been resurrected, because as this scene ends, Peter and John simply “returned to their homes.” There is no indication that John goes back to the tell the other

disciples that Jesus is risen. John's life, as of this moment, seems to be relatively unchanged, even after he "sees and believes."

After they are gone, the narrative returns to focus on Mary who is standing outside the tomb weeping. Imaginably, in the time it took Peter and John to investigate, Mary has made her way back to see for herself the interior of the grave. "As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb."

As Mary peers inside, she sees two angels dressed in white sitting where Jesus' body had been lying. Somehow, John and Peter missed this detail, or more likely, the angels appeared after Peter and John had left. It is intentional that the angels are there to speak first to Mary.

The angels ask, "Why are you weeping?"

Mary once more confirms what she believes has happened, responding, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Mary is so distraught by what she has convinced herself has happened that she can't even acknowledge that there are two angels dressed in white sitting in the tomb that Peter and John just left. All she wants is to know where Jesus' body has been taken.

As soon as she finished speaking, (again, not acknowledging there were angels sitting there) she turned away from the grave and she sees a man standing before her. We know what Mary does not know. John makes us privy to information Mary has not yet discerned. It is Jesus standing before her.

Jesus asks, "Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?"

John fills us in on her mental processing: "she thought him to be the gardener" – the caretaker. Were he indeed the superintendent of the cemetery, this is the man who should have been there to prevent the grave robbing ... perhaps it was he who moved Jesus' body. Mary begs of him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where I might find his body, and I will take him away." She just

wants Jesus' body; she wants to ensure a proper burial for her departed teacher. She is still looking for the dead remnants of Jesus' earthly vessel.

In her lament, it will not take much for Mary to understand what we have already come to know.

Jesus speaks her name, "Mary."

"It is not Jesus' voice that Mary recognizes (she had not recognized it the moment before), but the sound of her name from that voice, as one who comprehends completely and in deepest friendship."²

I recently saw a video of a young child who, having been born deaf, had just received cochlear implants. As a toddler, the child had never heard the voice of their parents. One of the first words the child's mother spoke to the child, who was now hearing for the first time, was the child's name. In the video, you can see this immediate look of shock on the child's face, followed by an outburst of emotion. It is that kind of response that I imagine Mary experienced in the moment when she heard her name roll off Jesus' lips.

Jesus speaks her name, "Mary," and in that moment, she knew it was him. Jesus calling her name *is* the announcement of the resurrection.³

Now knowing Jesus to be alive, Mary cries out, "Teacher!" She is overwhelmed, filled with awe and belief. She is so filled with joy that she lunges at him, wanting to embrace that which she thought she had lost. But Jesus says to her, "Do not hold on to me, but go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." And Mary Magdalene went and she announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that [Jesus] had said these things to her."

There is so much emotion wrapped up in this Easter memory. It is a story that begins with grief; a story that is filled with concern and lament; a story that expresses the tangible fear of humanity that all may be lost. It is not

uncommon for us to share in Mary's fear that Jesus is dead and gone; what hope do we have? Rev. Scott Hoezee offers, "Mary Magdalene on Easter morning is an emblem of the whole human condition. Mary is at once every single one of us and the whole lot of us taken together. And so it is precisely into *that* situation of dereliction that Easter must burst forth."⁴

Admittedly, it can be hard at times to see the resurrected Lord even when he is standing just in front of us. Mary's story is one that speaks for us as the Church, who have so often failed to see the glory of God before us. Mary's weeping before the empty tomb is symbolic of all the times we have failed to understand God's work in this world. Mary's presence before the angels is a testimony to all the times we as the Church have gotten it wrong, being unable to see the work of God around us. But it precisely because we so often fail that Jesus shows up and calls out our name.

Risen from the dead, Jesus calls Mary's name and Mary sees what she had not been able to see before. As the Rev. Dr. Jan Rippentrip offers, "Recognition of Jesus liberates Mary to proclaim a new reality. Likewise, one's own recognition of Jesus liberates one from old ways and orients one toward God's new life."⁵

As we see the risen Lord – as we hear the resurrected one calling out our names – we find that new life is possible. We are promised in this moment that for each and every one of us, God has a hope and a future. In the Easter story, we are all Marys: disciples of a risen Lord who knows each of us intimately and who calls us each by name to remind us of what we did not think possible – that we have hope for a future where life wins out over death and when love wins out over hate! This is God's truth proclaimed for us all!

And yet, Mary's story – our story – it is not individual. As Mary yearns to embrace the risen Lord, to celebrate her found joy, Jesus sends her forth, instructing her to go and proclaim that he is ascending to God in heaven – a declaration that promises Christ will always be present among us.

We often use Easter to claim God's love for us as individuals, referring to our own salvation and opportunity for new life. But for God, the resurrection of Christ is not simply an individual victory. The Easter story is not merely personal. The victory of Christ over the grave is a statement of God's will for the world – for our global corporate identity.

Receiving the good news of the risen Christ is not an individual gift; it is always communal. Mary runs back to the disciples and she proclaims, "I have seen the Lord!" To her community, to her people, to those who were, just like she, existing in the fear and hopelessness of a world without the glory of God, she proclaims, Jesus lives! Our freedom, found in the jubilant celebration of the risen Christ, carries over that others may be freed too.

In this past season of Lent, we have been asking the question, "Why, Church?", acknowledging all the times we, like Mary, get it wrong – all the ways in which we have failed to witness to the good of God in the world. In the Easter story, in the proclamation that Mary takes back to the disciples, we find our answer. We find our *why!*

Why Church? This is why the Church exists: because we have witnessed the Risen Lord who calls our name, whose resurrected presence is the promise of God's glory in the world! We have this truth in the resurrection that no political empire, neither Rome, Russia, or America, has enough power to overcome the glory of God in this world. The promise of Easter is that in all situations, in all places, for the time that is now and the time that is to come, life wins out over death, peace wins out over turmoil, and justice wins out over evil.

We, the Church, have a promise that can free the weeping souls of this hurting and broken world. We, the Church, have a proclamation from God to declare that can give hope to the brokenhearted and peace to the weary. We, the Church, have a story to tell because we have seen the Lord; he has called out our name and we have been gifted with the promise of new life.

So go forth and declare, give testimony to the good news, that Jesus Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! And Amen!

¹ Gerard Sloyan. *John: Interpretation, A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1987.

² Paul Simpson Duke. *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

³ Duke.

⁴ Scott Hoezee. "John 19:1-18." cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved 2018.

⁵ Jan Rippentrip. "John 19:1-18." Politicaltheology.com. Retrieved April 9, 2022.