



Jesus' Resurgence

John 20:1-18

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Good morning, and Happy Easter! It's a joy to be gathered with you as we celebrate the glory of Easter and the good news of the resurrection. One of the ways we remember the gift of new life at Easter is with the painting and hiding of Easter Eggs. You may find that some of the eggs from this morning's egg hunt went unfound in your pew – please feel free to take them home as a tangible way to remember the joy of this day.

Easter is a joyous day, but as it is told in our Biblical text, that first Easter morning had a strange beginning. See, our text begins with Mary Magdalene visiting a gravesite.

I've long been curious about our fascination as a people with gravesites. I passed a cemetery on my way to the church this morning a little before 8am, and there was a large crowd gathered for an Easter Sunrise service. Mary wasn't the only one who went to visit a cemetery on an Easter morning.

But this is not just an Easter phenomenon – we tend to visit the gravesites of loved ones throughout the year. Sometimes we visit on someone's past birthday; we may visit on an anniversary; or, if the person was active military, we may visit on Memorial Day, or July 4th. My family has a homestead down in Florida, and my grandparents were buried in the cemetery just next door to the family property. Almost every time – if not *every* time – we have family gatherings, there's always a pilgrimage. Someone sounds the alarm, we put on our walking shoes, and we trek the mile or so path over to visit the headstones for Grandpa and Grandma.

I'm never really sure what people expect to encounter at a cemetery, when visiting the final resting place of a lost loved one. I'm not really sure what Mary Magdalene was expecting to find when she approached the tomb while it was still dark on that first Easter morning. I imagine that for many of us, visiting the gravesites of passed loved ones offers us the closest we can get to being in their presence. We know that, though without life, their physical being was laid to rest in this space, and there's something comforting, if not cathartic, about being in that location with them – even if only in memory.

I imagine that's part of what drove Mary to the tomb that day. She was hurting at the way Jesus had been treated. She was distraught over having lost a teacher. She was longing to be in Jesus' presence for even but a few more minutes.

For Mary, Jesus was not just another man, or just another rabbi ... or even just a friend. In Luke, chapter 8, we are told that Mary Magdalene had been cured *by Jesus* of seven demons, which

had possessed her body. Jesus wasn't just another person for Mary, he was the one who had given her a new chance at life. Jesus had made it so Mary could once again be a part of the community. Jesus had made it so that Mary Magdalene could engage with, and once again be in relationship with others. And in response to Jesus' gift of healing, Mary helped provide for the work of Jesus and had given resources for the disciples who travelled with him. This was not a passive relationship, she was invested in this man, in his ministry, in his teaching, and in his healing. She had heard his promises of being more than just a rabbi – he had talked about being the Son of God, and rising from the dead. But alas, now he was confined to the walls of the tomb.

I imagine that Mary Magdalene approached the tomb on that first Easter morning with little more expectation than to sit at the entrance and by proximity remember once more the joy of life Jesus had previously given her.

As she approached the tomb, the text says that Mary saw the stone had been removed. To our knowledge, she didn't peer in, she didn't look around, she didn't investigate to figure out what had happened. The text says, she turned and ran for help. ... As well she should have. Right? Let's be honest, if when visiting the gravesite of a loved one while it's still dark outside, you see up ahead that the headstone is knocked over, and that the dirt from the site has been dug out and is heaped into piles alongside the grave, and the vault cover is removed and laid on its side next to the hole ... don't expect me to help you investigate. I've watched one too many horror shows to consider hanging around. I'm going to follow Mary's lead and run for help.

She runs, and perhaps only God knows what she was thinking as she ran. The fear, the confusion, the concern, the devastation, the heartbreak ... it all flooded her mind as she sought to find help. As Mary Magdalene arrives back at the place the disciples had holed themselves up, she says to them, probably while gasping for breath from her run, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Just as quickly as Mary had run to them, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, likely John, waste no time and they run back to the tomb.

As the two disciples arrive at the tomb, it appears they were unwilling to take Mary at her word, for when they arrive, they did their own investigation. John beats Peter to the tomb and looks in, visually inspecting the place for the body of Jesus. Peter, arriving just a few steps later, makes his way *into* the tomb, finding nothing but the burial clothes laid nicely on the ground. Their inspection confirmed Mary's suspicion; the body of Jesus was gone. Somewhat anticlimactically, the text says the two disciples were at a loss, and they returned to their homes.

By the time they finish confirming Mary Magdalene's testimony, Mary had returned. "Indeed, in all the Gospels, women are the closest witnesses of both the crucifixion and the resurrection."ⁱ When the disciples abandoned Jesus before the crucifixion, the women remained. When the disciples left the empty tomb, the women remained.

There, alone, Mary persisted outside the tomb weeping as the disciples departed.

She isn't weeping because of Jesus' death; she's weeping because his body is gone. For Mary, the absence of the body is catastrophic. "There is nothing even residual of him, no touchstone of remembrance, no vestige of actual presence, no place that is not empty of him."ⁱⁱ Even the burial cloth seem to be void of ever having touched the body – cleanly folded as if they had not even been used. For someone looking to rest in the presence of their departed loved one, Mary Magdalene has nothing of Jesus to hold onto. Even her memories seem devoid of truth. "The evidence is that the claims and promise of Jesus were, like his tomb, empty."ⁱⁱⁱ How does one rest in the memory of a promise that seems to be shattered at the foundation?

Perhaps hoping her eyes deceived her the first time, looking for anything that could offer her hope in the midst of this misery, Mary Magdalene, through water filled eyes, looks again into the tomb. This time, the tomb is not empty – there she sees two angels in white, and they ask her, "Why are you weeping?"

Mary repeats the claim she made to the disciples, "They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid them."

Perhaps he made a noise, perhaps he stepped on a fallen branch, or perhaps she felt the presence of another person in her midst ... something caused Mary to turn away from the two white-clothed angels in the tomb to turn and see another man standing near her. Though she did not know, the text makes it plain for us, this man was Jesus. He inquired of her, just as the angels had before, "Why are you weeping?", adding, "Whom are you looking for?"

We should be cautious in hearing condescension in Jesus' voice. Rev. Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary in Michigan names that "often we read this ironically; that is to say **we** know there is actually no reason whatsoever [for Mary] to weep and so we inflect Jesus' words with a tone similar to what a parent would take toward a child who is crying over a dead pet, when, really, the pet is just fine and sleeping over in the corner."^{iv} We may *want* to hear Jesus speaking with a bit of sarcasm, or even snark, as if to say, "Just open your eyes, I'm right here. It is me."

Yet, "Jesus knew better than anyone that Mary Magdalene's tears are representative of the tears of humanity."^v Mary's weeping on that first Easter morning while sitting outside of the empty tomb of the one who had promised to give us new life is representative of each of us who has ever wept over our own brokenness. From the mother who weeps over the death of her child, to the doctor who weeps over the flatline of a patient, to the addict who weeps over the brokenness of their family, to the teacher who weeps over the loss of a student, to the spouse who weeps over the separation of a partner, to the community who weeps over their farewell to a resident ... Mary's tears fall for each and every person who in any moment, when facing finality and brokenness, believes that there is *no* hope for the future.

"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."^{vi}

Jesus doesn't speak with snark, but more likely, with compassion. The compassion of one who knows the brokenness of the one who weeps – empathetic to their misery and pain.

Jesus speaks again, saying to her, "Mary!" ... He calls her name. Oh, but there is power in the name. She hears her name, and she turns to him, crying out, "Rabbouni! ... Teacher!"

In that moment, not when Mary heard his voice, but when she heard him speak her *name*, "the empty tomb becomes more than the abstract truth of God's power over death. In that moment, the empty tomb becomes the concrete reality of the presence of the risen Lord."^{vii}

Mary lunges for Jesus. I picture it being a moment like you might see in one of those military reunion videos. Do you know what I'm talking about? The child is standing in front of or next to their parent who has just returned from a long tour abroad. Only, the child doesn't know it's their parent, because the parent is dressed up like the school mascot or something. And when the parent takes the mascot's mask off, or when they come out from behind a screen, or when the blindfold is removed – the child, seeing their parent, hearing their parent call their name, realizing who it is ... the child doesn't say much, perhaps nothing more than "MOM!" or "DAD!", but they lunge for an embrace. They want to hold on tight, because they don't want their parent to leave again. Sadly, no one was there to film Jesus' revealing his identity to Mary Magdalene, but I imagine it went something like that. She could only muster the strength to exclaim, "TEACHER!" as she lunged in for an embrace. She doesn't want to lose him again.

Their moment doesn't last long. Jesus says 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." So, Mary went and she announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that Jesus had said these things to her. Mary, empowered by Jesus, under Jesus' instruction, became the first preacher of the good news of the Gospel, that indeed, Jesus – God's Son – was raised from the dead.

Mary gives us the first example of the good news of the Easter resurrection.

The good news of Easter isn't that we have any special capability to see and know God for ourselves, or even to proclaim the presence of God in the risen Christ. Mary stood there with Jesus talking to her, and she didn't know his identity. This wasn't the only example of believers missing Jesus' presence. Jesus went forth and journeyed with two men on the Road to Emmaus, and they did not know that he was Jesus. He went to the Galilean seaside and yelled instructions at the disciples who were having a miserable fishing day – they had no clue it was Jesus. What we find in the Biblical story, and what I believe we will find in our personal lives, is that our understanding of who *we are* – claiming new life for ourselves – is only made possible when we are filled with the knowledge of who he is – the risen Christ. Jesus' resurgence – his new life – is what makes possible our new life.

Mary's tears – her weeping – her concern – her brokenness – these fears turn to hope and to promise in the sound of her name from the lips of the risen One. And hearing her name doesn't just give her new life, it doesn't just give her hope, it doesn't just give her a promise for a future, it gives her a *purpose*. Mary Magdalene becomes the apostle to the apostles, the bearer of the Good News, the annunciator of Jesus' resurrection.

Friends, the good news of Easter Sunday is not simply that Jesus *is* risen. Too many people see the empty tomb, but fail to see the presence of the risen Lord in their midst. The good news of Easter Sunday is not just that the Lord *is* risen, it's that the risen Lord is calling your name, inviting you to receive new life in the grace of the Almighty. May you hear the voice of the Lord that calls to you – that seeks you out – that promises you new life – so that you too may go forth in the glory of the good news to share the promise of the empty tomb, that the Lord is not simply missing, but that Christ is risen – Christ is risen indeed!

ⁱ Susan Grove Eastman. *Feasting on the Gospels: John*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Scott Hoezee. *John 20: 1-18*. <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>. Retrieved April 16, 2019.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Gail R. O'Day. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.