

#### 4.9.23 Easter Sunday From a Night of Grief to a Dawn of Hope John 20.1-18

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

But Mary stood there weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.”* When she has said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not that it was Jesus. 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.”* Jesus said to her, **“Mary!”** She turned and said to him in Hebrew, *“Rabbouni!”* (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, *“Do not hold onto 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.’”* 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.”

For some of us this is a day of joy and celebration. For others it's a day tinged with sadness or grief. It's the first Easter for many people without a particular loved one: a husband or wife, a father or mother, a sibling or a grandparent, a son or daughter, or a friend or companion. There are many of us who come to worship this Easter morning who are grieving like Mary Magdalene and are shrouded in the night and darkness of grief. Easter is also a time many of us think of loved ones who passed many years ago, but there's something about this week that draws us close again in our hearts and memories.

The Easter gospel passage from John is about bereaved friends, including two guys who, like many men, have room to grow in compassion and emotional intelligence, although it's probably understandable given the circumstances. Have you ever wondered why people will rush to attend funerals but don't come see you when you need them? Sadly, when Jesus needed the support and companionship of his disciples and friends the most, they denied and deserted him. Of Jesus' male disciples, only the one whom Jesus loved, we believe that was John, was present at the crucifixion. All the rest had fled or gone into hiding. Mary Magdalene was among the few women gathered in the shadow of that terrible scene of execution.

Mary, in the darkness of grief, before the sun had fully risen on Sunday morning, returned to the tomb. Most of us walk with heavy hearts and slow steps when we visit graves, as some of us may do later today or this week, or on other special days like birthdays or anniversaries. We go with our memories, thoughts, and feelings as Mary did, and we sit or stand and we remember. We may smile with longing remembering good times, but more often we wipe away a tear. One thing we rarely do in a cemetery is run. That would seem inappropriate. But in this passage from John 20, everybody is running in the cemetery. You can almost see the sweat on the pages of your Bible. For some of us running would be difficult and would look like Good Friday – pain, agony, and grimacing. Children, on the other hand, often run with pure joy. When children run, they look like Easter. They run for the sheer joy of running. They run because it's fun to run. They run because you won't or can't run. They run because it is great to move that fast. They love to run. But in our passage, Mary is not running with joy.

Mary is running because she's distraught. Shocked to find the large stone rolled away and the body of Jesus missing, Mary runs from the cemetery spurred by grief and fear and says to Simon Peter, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*" Those who have suffered the painful loss of a loved one whose body has never been found or recovered know especially well what Mary is experiencing. Not only is her beloved gone, she cannot see or touch the body. So, she runs to get the John and Peter.

Verses 2-9 describe the footrace between Peter and the beloved disciple and it reads almost like the call of a horse race. Peter and John set out racing for the tomb, they're neck and neck and then down the stretch they come, it's John pulling away and the reaching the tomb first. He looks in, but doesn't enter until Peter, the perceived leader, arrives and enters first, followed by John. Jesus is not among the dead even though his body had been extravagantly anointed, wrapped, and sealed in the tomb by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

The linen wrappings in the tomb were similar to those that bound Jesus' friend Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. In that case, Jesus had the stone taken away that blocked the tomb and called Lazarus saying (John 11:43-44), "*Lazarus, come out!*" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "*Unbind him, and let him go.*" While Lazarus needed help getting unwrapped, Jesus didn't. The linen wrappings had not been unwound but were lying like a flattened cocoon bearing mute testimony to one freed from the bonds of death. All three of Jesus' close friends are shocked at the emptiness of the tomb. Let's not pretend that believing in the resurrection is easy. The resurrection of Jesus is perhaps the most radical Christian doctrine and people respond to it in different ways, including the characters in the biblical story.

The disciple whom Jesus loved has **A Simple Faith**. Verse 8 says John "*saw and believed.*" Compared to Peter, he was not only a faster runner; he was faster to faith. Some of us are like John. Coming to faith in the risen Jesus is not difficult for us. We come to church on Easter Sunday thinking, "*Of course he's risen. He's risen indeed.*" If we're like John we may not even remember a time when we didn't know, trust, or love Jesus. If we're like John faith seems natural, it doesn't necessarily mean

we're simple-minded, easily manipulated, unaware of the grief and heartache of life, or religious fanatics. But believing comes more easily to folks like John. Our labor pains were brief before our spiritual birth. But if you're like John you need to remember, it isn't so simple for everyone else. John is the only person for whom the empty tomb was sufficient evidence to birth the "yes" of faith. It wasn't enough for Mary or Peter.

Peter has **A Struggling Faith**. Some of us are like Peter. Peter also came running, perhaps with a small sense of hope. But Peter finds believing a struggle. Coming to faith is neither easy nor natural. Like some of us, Peter is a bit skeptical. For folks like Peter, our labor pains before our spiritual birth may be prolonged and at times painful. It will take a variety of experiences before all his questions are answered and his doubt overcome. Perhaps Peter is a little older than John and that's why he's a slower runner and slower to believe. Most people who make the decision to follow Jesus do so by their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Perhaps after that age we're increasingly bruised by life, and it gets more difficult to run to faith. Perhaps Peter was slower because he ran to the tomb weighed down by the memory of his own weakness and failure. Peter was the rough fisherman who could swear with the best of them. He had proven that just the other night when he swore up and down in the colorful language fishermen sometimes use that he didn't even know Jesus, much less follow him.

Peter weighed down by his weakness, gnawed by guilt at denying knowing Jesus, haunted by his failures – **sees the exact same things John does**, but there's no flash of insight, no declaration of faith. Instead, he walks away wondering what it all means. Simon Peter walks away from the empty tomb that first Easter morning not as a believer. Some of you may walk away from this service that way. For Peter, the truth dawned a little later, when Jesus appeared to him, forgave him, and gave him a job to do. Part of the meaning of Easter is that **Jesus came back especially for people like Peter who believed that Jesus couldn't have come back for them**. If you're like Peter, faith comes after a struggle, not simply as it does for John, but it does come for Peter, and if you stay open to Christ, faith can come for you too.

John and Peter are typical men. Mary came to them gulping through her tears that the Lord was nowhere to be found. She's heartbroken and grief-stricken. Peter and John come running, survey the situation, reach their own conclusions, and leave, **totally**

**clueless to Mary's feelings!** No words of consolation, no hug of support, nothing. Having been left completely alone when she could have used a shoulder to cry on, Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. Mary's is **A Grieving Faith**. As she wept, she bent over to look in the tomb and she saw two angels. Angels are much more sensitive to suffering than most men, so they ask 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.*"

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't realize it was Jesus, she thinks he's the gardener. Jesus is even more sensitive to and aware of our heartache than angels, so Jesus said to her, "*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?*" Then he calls her by name, "**Mary!**" In John 10 Jesus said he was the Good Shepherd and in **John 10:3-4**, we're told, "**He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.**" **Jesus calls Mary out of the night of grief into the dawn of hope.** Mary's grief turned to joy when she experienced Jesus calling her by name.

There may be some of us who feel like Mary did. Some of us may be so blinded and burdened by grief that we'd have difficulty recognizing Jesus even if he were right in front of us. Perhaps others like Peter, burdened by their own weaknesses and past failures had no compassion to share with you in your time of grief. Mary needs more evidence than John to believe. He didn't need angels or a word from the Lord, but you do. But Jesus knows your name and he can ease your pain. And part of Mary's ministry is to share with others who need to hear the good news that death is not the end. She went to mourn and give Jesus a wake. She didn't know Jesus was awake. She came searching for the dead body of her loved one. She was found by his living and life-giving presence. Mary preaches the first Easter message, "**I have seen the Lord.**" Her witness is part of what helps lead struggling Peter to faith.

Like Mary, some of us are weeping today. For a family member or friend who has died, for a relationship that is broken, health that has deteriorated, a job lost, dreams that never materialized. In the midst of our weeping the resurrection may sound ridiculous, impossible, or too good to be true. It depends if you're more like John, Peter, or Mary. Are you like **John** for whom believing comes simply? Celebrate and give

thanks for that. Are you like **Peter** struggling to come to faith, still haunted by the past, not believing that God loves you and forgives you regardless of what you've done? Know that God loves you no matter who you are or what you've done, and all you have to do is ask God to forgive you and decide to follow Jesus. Are you like **Mary**, so weighed down by the night of grief that it doesn't seem like the dawn of hope will ever come? If you are, know that the promise of Easter is that Jesus knows your name and can ease your pain. He can give you hope when hope is gone. He'll give you strength to journey on.

God raised Jesus from the dead and that changes everything. Jesus' followers experienced Jesus after his death in an entirely new way. Jesus is absent from the place of death, and **he goes to God before us and for us**. Easter has come and Jesus is calling your name. Mary went to the tomb to weep.

She ran from the cemetery the first time **filled with grief and a question**.

She ran from the cemetery the second time **with joy and a message for all who will believe**, *"I have seen the Lord!"* HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What emotion do you most associate with Easter? Why?
2. Mary comes to Jesus' tomb weighed down by grief. How do you think that impacted her initial response to what she found and saw?
3. Mary, John, and Peter all see certain things on that first Easter morning, yet they have different responses to what they see; how do their reactions reflect different ways people respond to Jesus and the news of his crucifixion and resurrection?
4. In John's account of the resurrection how would you describe the role of hearing compared to seeing? Are there times in your life when you've failed to "see" God even when God was close?
5. Mary's response changes dramatically when Christ calls her by name like a Good Shepherd (see John 10:3, 14). With God's help, where are there signs of hope in your life even in the face of loss or grief?
6. The risen Christ tells Mary to go tell the good news of his resurrection to the other disciples (John 20:17-18). Who needs to hear your story of Easter joy and what God has done for you?