

Gospel - John: 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

Sermon 4.4.21

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Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Especially on this celebrated Feast of Easter: Grace, mercy and peace are yours from the Triune God. Amen.

Mary Magdalene is a woman of firsts. She's first to be delivered from seven demons, first among women to financially support Jesus' ministry and one of the first women named among his disciples; she is first to visit the tomb on Sunday morning, first to discover Christ's missing body, first to report this to Peter and John, and the first person to witness Jesus returned to life.

As I hope you soon discover, she is also the first to lay down for us a pattern of seeking and finding we still follow today.

After hearing her report about the empty tomb, the two primary male disciples take off running. St John says, presumably about himself, *he reached the tomb first before Peter, went in, and he saw and believed.*

This raises a certain question for me: What exactly was it that John "saw and believed"?

Did he believe that Jesus was alive? No, it couldn't be that; because John goes on to say that he and Peter "as yet did not understand the scripture that Christ must rise from the dead."

So I ask again, what was it that John saw and believed? I can only conclude he saw for himself the tomb was empty, just as Mary had reported. He saw the linen grave clothes but no body.

Thus John believed what Mary's believed: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." John believed that someone had removed the body.

They say, "seeing is believing," and in the discouragement of this particular seeing and believing, John and Peter return to their homes. Mary continues to linger, weeping.

She stoops down to look inside. This time she sees quite differently—two bright angels sit at head stone and foot stone. They ask her why she is crying. Suddenly, too, there's a man right beside her asking the same question, "Why are you weeping; whom are you seeking?"

Imagine with me the intense sorrow of Mary and her entourage. From the other Gospels we know she is accompanied by Mary the mother of James, Salome, Joanna and other women. Probably they are giving her space for her grief and sobbing. No doubt each one of them is in their own world of sorrow. Not only have the authorities crucified their Jesus, but adding insult to injury, they have spirited away his body from the tomb.

Now here is the groundskeeper—a glimmer of hope? Perhaps he knows the whereabouts of the body of Jesus.

“Oh, Sir,” Mary says, “if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

It is at this moment that Jesus speaks her name. **Jesus said, “Mary,”** and Mary sees!

The scales had fallen from her eyes in stages. First she saw only the empty darkness; next she had a vision of angels; next, as she supposed, she saw the caretaker of the garden, and now she perceives a revelation of Jesus himself, alive from death.

Her response is immediate. She clutches onto him. With all her body language she communicates, “Please don’t leave me!” According to St Matthew the other women also see Jesus and grasp his feet.

Jesus’ own response is likewise immediate. “It is not now time for you to hold onto me too tightly for yourself alone; I have a message I am sending you to share.”

The intimate kindness of Jesus on this first Easter morning stands out to me. He simply speaks the name, Mary, and her grief is replaced by amazement and her throws of sobbing by wonder and hope.

There is so much to read between the lines. The ever-living, ever-caring Jesus, moved by this woman’s passionate despair, simply says to her, “Mary,” and it is as much say, “Everything is okay now. Your world is okay. Life is okay. I am alive. I am here.”

How long was the interval before Jesus warned, “You had better let go”? Did he allow her to cling to him for a while?

That is my own experience. God allows me to hang onto his Presence and Intimacy for as long as it takes—till my despair loses its grip and there settles in a deep, deep peace. Then is time to begin to let go and live in a new, altered relationship.

Psalm 132 is a very short song about the experience of emotional change and exchange:

¹ *O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;*

*I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.*

² *But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

Think about the weaning of a nursing child. Its soul is nothing at all like “calmed” and “quieted.” It screams and shrieks and its entire little body convulses on account of the absence of its mother’s breasts; as if to say, “My milk is gone, my source of life is gone, my entire world is gone; I cannot bear it!”

Eventually there is giving up and letting go; there is peace. Eventually comes calm and quiet of soul, eventually hope.

So it is that the psalm concludes with a statement of hope:

³ *O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.*

The little baby in relationship to its mother has changed. The mother herself has changed. Life and sustenance have changed.

Breast milk gets replaced by pabulum and later on by a fork and knife. Holding and coddling get replaced by growing and developing and learning and release into small but ever-increasing measures of independence and self-sufficiency. The parent is ever-present, but the relationship changes.

Despair and heartbreak, sorrow and grief, anger and shaking—eventually all can give way to brokenness, to calm and quiet and to humility and peace.

Some people, I suppose, never do reach that final “eventually.” They always are stuck in their anger and pain and a desperate clinging onto what once used to be.

“Mary,” Jesus says, “you don’t need to cling too much to me. I am with you. I trust you. I commission you. I have a message for you to share.” *Go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”*

All of this is so familiar a pattern, and we have all played it out, perhaps many number of times—a desperate sorrow or circumstance whose question cannot be answered; then a desperate search for an answer that makes any kind of sense; then having a profound personal experience of the Answer as something quite beyond ourselves, then wanting to protract and prolong that experience so it never goes away, and finally bearing a message to others to believe and experience the Answer we ourselves have come to know.

This is the pattern of our Easter witness. We seek. We find. Or rather we are found. We experience. We are changed. We are sent to share in words and deeds.

It is the pattern of our Sunday worship. Easter Sunday, falling once a year, like Christmas, is a particularly high feast day—indeed it’s the highest—entirely special to the communion of saints.

Yet we may easily forget that every Sunday is Easter Sunday. It’s why we worship on the first day, Sunday, the Lord’s Day—because on that day our Lord was raised.

Nevertheless, as Mary sought, we also seek. We come, we approach, we confess. Not like Mary we confess; we confess things we have done and things we have left undone. Mary, confessed, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

But the two themes are identical. Mary confesses her estrangement. We confess our estrangement. We hear words of absolution, as does Mary, but her absolution—and revelation—are in the hearing of her name from the lips of her Savior.

In these Covid times, when our building is closed and our gathering so very small in number, when we make our approach to the holy tomb, the Altar, the Lord’s Table, we are especially now aware of our coming one-by-one. It is as if Christ calls us by name, as he did on that first Easter morning:

Mary. Elinor. Kelsey. Skylar. David.

You, who are watching at home, think of your own name and of Christ calling you by name. He knows you. He cares for you. His attention is on you. Sometimes, especially in worship and hymnody, we sense in our emotion how particularly precious it is to say the name of Jesus. Oh, how even more precious to Jesus for him to have our names on his lips.

When I was in high school and falling in love with the person who has been my lifelong partner, I would write Lynn's name in my notebook, filling up the page and turning to the next. Did you ever do that? It is how Jesus thinks about you, writing your name, saying your name, over and over. Indeed the Greek language used in John's Gospel may infer Jesus repeats her name any number of times: Mary, Mary, Mary.

Jesus calls our name in love and invites our approach: "The gifts of God for the people of God," we hear. We recognize our very Savior at the Holy Altar — outside the tomb, so to speak.

We grasp Jesus in our hands like Mary as we receive the bread, Christ's body. Jesus is alive! We hold onto him, the one so dear to our hearts. Raising the bread to our lips is like a kiss, and we want it to last forever. Indeed it does last forever, and also lasts only a moment. Before we know it, we are being sent out to the world as Mary was sent back to Jesus' brothers. In this way, Sunday by Sunday, we repeat the resurrection story of Mary and our own personal experience of meeting the living Jesus.

The anthem of invitation to the Table reads:

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;

Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

Today I will add:

O taste and see the living Lord that he is good.

Blessed are all those who put their trust in him. Amen.