

John 20:1-18^{vi vii}

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 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 had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know 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 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.'" 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.

vi About the Gospel: John 20:1-18

Today’s reading describes the experience of the discovery of the empty tomb and the different responses of the disciples and the appearance of the Risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene. Early on the first day after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene discovers that Jesus’ tomb lies open. Her first instinct is to tell Peter and the others.

After hearing her breathless message that Jesus’ body has been taken, Peter and the beloved disciple run to visit the tomb. They find only the burial cloths but not the body of Jesus. The simple fact of the empty tomb does not produce faith for Mary or for Peter. The evangelist recognizes that they did not, as yet, understand the meaning of scripture about the resurrection of the dead (v. 9). Only the beloved disciple, who is the model Christian disciple for John and his community, “saw and believed” (v. 8). Mary, Peter and the other disciples must depend on the appearance of Jesus or a report of his appearance to trigger and confirm their belief.

Mary experiences the Risen Lord, whom she mistakes for a gardener. Until she hears his voice, Mary does not recognize the Risen Jesus as the earthly Jesus whom she knew. The process of recognizing the Risen Jesus highlights both the continuity and the difference between his earthly and his risen forms.

The focus of the disciples’ relationship to Jesus must now shift from his physical presence to his spiritual presence within the community and in the believer. Jesus’ personal presence will be revealed in the community’s eucharistic celebration, through the words of scripture and in the Christian proclamation of the gospel. Jesus’ permanent presence in the community will not be through appearances but through the Spirit, who will be the presence of the absent Jesus just as Jesus was the presence of the invisible Father. Jesus must “go away” for that to be accomplished (John 16:7).

vii Reflection and Response

If we hear the Easter story often, it loses its surprise. The zinger becomes familiar, the words worn. To restore our appreciation of the feast’s meaning, it may be helpful to think of an alternate ending to the story.

For example, reflect on this series of “what ifs?”: What if the whole scenario ended on Golgotha, and all farewells were final? What if a rock sealed the tomb with a heavy “thunk,” and it never re-opened? What if Mary arrived in the pre-dawn darkness and sat staring bitterly at a granite slab? What if Peter and John, exhausted, slept late that morning, then woke to face a dispirited and disillusioned group of disciples? What if they fought over the leadership roles, venting their frustration and disappointment on each other? What if the little band called Christian died out with the last apostle?

Do these hypotheses stir in us a sense of tragic loss? Perhaps they help us realize how drastically different human history would have been if the “what ifs” had been true. They also prompt us to wonder how different our own experience would be without the resurrection. We may know intellectually that Easter marks a new creation and that the evangelists announce a new beginning for the human race this day. But what does that

news mean in our daily lives?

Those who entered the empty tomb found no trace of Jesus. Everything associated with his death has been abandoned, even the grave cloths. We can learn from this action that those who would follow Christ must also abandon that which is death-dealing: habits that kill the body and relationships that kill the soul, the violence of weapons and harsh words, money and energy expended on destruction rather than creation. We may be sad, but we cannot be hopeless because that is an affront to our risen Lord. By defying death, he gave us grounds for an unending and unlimited hope. He deprived the cynics and the pessimists of any truth in their viewpoint because he disarmed the ultimate evil: death. Anxiety about lesser enemies seems trivial in comparison.

With four words, John shows us the proper response to such a revelation: “he saw and believed.” The empty tomb calls us to trust God in any situation that seems dead-ended. The psalmist uses the image of the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone to show how God can bring surprising reversals out of that which appears to be lost.

Paul teaches us how the Easter message can lift our sights. Because we are destined for eternal life, it is silly to waste our time and talents on that which is merely transitory. When, inevitably, we must fuss with the things of this world, we can do so with humor and detachment, knowing how ephemeral they are.

As we return to our routines this week, will the Easter celebration make a difference? If we plod through our duties doggedly, skeptical that we can ever effect change, then we are living as though Easter had not happened. If we resume habits that are slowly killing us physically or spiritually, then we act as though the sad “what ifs” came true. But if we eagerly launch a week filled with potential, beauty, and challenge, hopeful about our ministry and committed to our risen Lord, then we have truly invited Christ to easter in us.

Quietly consider:

How can I believe in Jesus’ presence in the “empty tombs” of my life?