

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25:6-9
SECOND LESSON: John 20:1-18
March 31, 2024
EASTER

“The Empty Tomb”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The last thing Mary expected, was to see Jesus. She had watched Jesus die. Imagine how crazy making it would be if a loved one you had seen die turned up three days later? Our minds would go into instant denial. *It must be someone else.* The last time I saw him he looked horrible and he was suffering. Now he is healthy and standing in front of me. *It has to be someone else!*

Mary was overcome with grief. She was likely going between tears that would not stop, and complete numbness. Her entire world had collapsed. The man who she thought was invincible was gone. Her only thought probably was, *I have to do something for him . . . anything . . .* and so she went to the tomb. Her eyes would have been puffy and red, and she wouldn't have slept properly for days. But as she stood outside the tomb knowing that it could not get any worse, it did. The stone was rolled away and his body was gone.

Mary ran to get the others. Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, likely John, came with her to the tomb. They ran to the tomb. John got there first. He looked inside and saw the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Peter arrived next and immediately went inside, seeing strips of linen lying there as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. The body was just gone. They looked at everything but they had no idea what to make of it. Even if someone had successfully stolen the body they would have never removed the graveclothes. To do so would mean touching a dead body. Seeing them folded up made no sense at all. And opening the tomb without people knowing about it would have been impossible. The huge flat stone set in grooves across the entrance would have required the strength of several large men to move.

Peter and John didn't remain by the tomb. They went back to the place they were staying. Mary remained. She stood outside the tomb weeping. And when she bent over to look inside once again, the tomb that had been empty when Peter examined it, now had two angels in white seated at the head and foot of where Jesus' body had been. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

Mary was not at her most coherent at that moment. All she could think to say was, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him.” And then she turned around and saw another figure standing before her.

He too asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

She thought he was the gardener. It was the only thing that made sense to her in that moment. She said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

Just that one word, her own name, said in that most familiar voice, and the shock hit her. She turned to him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!”

Jesus told her, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

The conversation that Jesus really had with Mary would have been much longer than this. Tradition only provides the gist of the thing, not every detail. But while he may not have spent hours, Jesus probably sat with Mary, and comforted and reassured her. By the time she left his side, she was another person, no longer grief stricken, but amazed and filled with hope. Mary immediately did what she was told. She went to the other disciples and told them, “I have seen the Lord!”

The body was missing. There was no logical explanation. Guards would not have sat by and let a group of men come and roll the very heavy stone away. Roman guards at the time faced death for failing in their duty. Neither was the Sanhedrin engaged in body snatching. They wanted people to be in no doubt that Jesus was dead. But the stone was rolled away and the body was gone. We don’t know what happened to the guards posted at the tomb of Jesus, but if they were being paid by the Sanhedrin, they may have fared better than if they were under direct Roman orders, because it was in the interest of the Sanhedrin to hush things up.

The most irrefutable proof of the truth of the resurrection is not the empty tomb, however, but the transformation in Jesus’ followers. They were terrified and broken, hiding together behind locked doors. They were desolate, grieving and lost. They weren’t ready to go out and take up where their master left off. Peter was getting ready to go back to fishing. But then, out of nowhere, these fearful men and women transformed into bold leaders. Peter, who denied Jesus three times, who failed colossally, was restored and spoke with new authority. All of them went out together preaching, teaching and healing the sick throughout the towns. When commanded to be silent by the authorities they responded that they had to obey God rather than men.

The disciples met the risen Jesus, not just once or twice, but according to scripture many times over a period of 40 days. This makes sense to me, because Jesus had a lot to teach them, and a lot of strength and courage to impart. It was only after the resurrection that they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the kingdom they were building was not of this world. Gone were any ideas of political overthrow, wealth and glory. This was an entirely different mission.

If the establishment of a political kingdom had been the goal, things would have unfolded a lot differently. Jesus would never have been crucified, or if he had, he would not have appeared to Mary to comfort her in the garden, or to the disciples hiding together. Jesus would have strolled right into Herod’s

Court with armies of angels at his side. Pilate would have had a nervous breakdown on the spot. It would not have been Thomas who put his finger in Jesus hands and side; **it would have been Caiaphas**. This is how our world would do it. And secretly many people think that if it had been done our way, the whole thing would have been a lot more successful. Everyone would see, and everyone would accept. No more ambiguity, no more feeling embarrassed for having faith, no faith necessary at all in fact. The truth of who Jesus is and why he came would be self-evident. Wouldn't do a thing about sin, but it would definitely bring regime change.

But God knows the foolishness of this kind of plan. Things can be totally obvious and beyond question, and people will still reject the truth. Human nature has an almost limitless talent for denying reality. There are still people today who believe the earth is flat. There are people who believe that JFK is still alive. There are people who believe the coronavirus isn't real. Some who died in hospitals in 2020 demanded to know what they "really" had before passing away. And quite terrifyingly, there are even people who believe that the holocaust never happened. The human capacity for self-deception is inexhaustible. But aside from the fact that people can refuse to see what is right in front of them, there is another reason why God did not do things our way. Our way might change a political kingdom, but it would do nothing to change the human heart.

The human heart is perennially resistant to truth and humility. Because of our pride it cannot be through our intellect that we are saved, but only through faith. Our minds are just as fallen as every other part of us. We cannot come to experience and understand God's glorious grace through our mental prowess. Salvation from our sinful nature cannot rely on our sinful nature. Only by laying aside our pride and humbly surrendering to God, only by faith can our eyes be opened.

Mary was not expecting to see Jesus. For her, death was the end. She knew what death looked like. Everyone did in the first century. And she knew how terribly final it was. And then, it wasn't, and the entire world changed overnight. We only see and understand a small fragment of reality, and most of our assumptions about the way things are, are likely wrong. In Christ, death is not the end. Jesus came into the world. He became one of us. He experienced all of the struggles of life. He showed us what God is like in person. And then he suffered, died, and rose for us, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. Because Jesus lives, we live through faith in him. Amen

Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.
9 In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

John 20:1-18

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. **2** So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"
3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.**4** Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7** as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. **8** Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **9** (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) **10** Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.
11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb **12** and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.
13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"
"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." **14** At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.
15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."
16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."
She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").
17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"
18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.