

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 65:17-25
SECOND LESSON: John 20:1-18
April 17, 2022
EASTER

“Mary Don’t Cry”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The story goes that a man and his dog were out walking along the beach when they came upon another visitor to the beach. The owner of the dog was *extremely proud* of his dog’s newly mastered feat, so he said to the visitor, “Watch this!” and tossed a piece of driftwood far out into the sea. The dog immediately ran out on top of the ocean, fetched the wood and came back. The visitor just shook his head in disbelief. The proud dog owner then proceeded to repeat the entire procedure twice more. Finally, he asked the visitor, “Did you notice anything unusual?” The visitor responded, “*Your dog can’t swim, can he?*”

Often the miraculous can be right before our eyes, but our own framework of understanding completely blinds us to it.

John’s gospel tends to streamline events and single in on characters. In the story of Mary pouring expensive perfume on Jesus the other gospels have a whole group of people objecting to the waste. In John’s gospel the attention is all on Judas. In the other gospels it is a group of women who come to the tomb. John’s gospel only mentions Mary, although Mary is recorded as saying, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” For whatever reason, extraneous characters tend to disappear in John. That doesn’t mean they weren’t there. Mary, accompanied by other women, went to the tomb before dawn.

The accounts of the resurrection of Jesus do differ, but that is no doubt a result of who remembered what. Mary is the focus here. Mary was one of the strongest leaders in the early Church, so her memories were important. When the tomb was discovered to be empty, Mary went to alert Peter and the others. Peter and “the disciple Jesus loved”, traditionally understood to be John, ran to the tomb to see. They too found it empty. The fact that there were two men is important in this account for a reason I find somewhat infuriating. Legally the witness of a woman did not count. The standard was two men. Those reading this in the earliest days would have understood that a legal witness had just been established.

The entrance to the tomb was only about three feet high. It was not easy to get in and out. They may have brought torches with them because it was still dark. John waited until Peter came and then they both entered, finding the tomb empty and the grave clothes still there. Unlike Lazarus who emerged from the tomb still wrapped up like a mummy, these cloths had been carefully removed and folded. Grave robbers certainly would not do this. The last thing

they would have wanted would be to handle an unwrapped dead body. Once washed the linens also might have been valuable. At any rate, they would not have been left behind.

Peter and John left. Confused, wondering what this could mean, they returned home. Mary stayed at the tomb and continued to weep. As she cried, she bent over to look into the tomb once more. It had been empty when Peter and John were there. Now two angels in white were seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. This was turning out to be the strangest day in her life. 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." Then she turned and found that there was another man standing there. She did not realize that it was Jesus. He too asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Mary in her grief thought that he might be the gardener. She said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." None of this was very rational on her part. The trauma of what had taken place and the level of distress Mary was experiencing left common sense by the side of the road. Of course, a gardener would not have taken a body! And why would a gardener be there at dawn?

We always wonder why Mary did not recognize Jesus. Did the resurrection subtly change his appearance somehow? We know that Jesus' resurrection body was different, but we are at pains to describe how. Lazarus was raised from the dead to continue to live an ordinary mortal life and then die again. Jesus would never die again. Jesus' body was both as concrete as ours, but also capable of doing things our current bodies absolutely cannot do. Jesus appeared in a locked room for starters. He ate fish with his disciples on the beach after his resurrection, yet he didn't stay with them all the time. He didn't go to sleep and wake up in the morning with them as he had before. But no one knew where he went when he disappeared. All we can really say is that Jesus' resurrection body was still Jesus' body, but somehow completely transformed.

In whatever ways Jesus' body had changed, Jesus was still the last person on earth Mary expected to see. She had just seen him die. She knew what death looked like. There was no mistake. She had also been crying so much she could probably barely see, and it was still relatively dark. But where visual recognition failed, **auditory did not**. All Jesus had to do was say her name, and she knew immediately who it was. "Rabboni!" she cried.

The conversation does not seem to have been a long one. 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.'"

We have here another mystery. It sounds like Jesus was going to ascend to God immediately. If so, his other visits with the disciples were from heaven before his final ascension. We don't know. Is ascension a process or a single event? In Luke's gospel and the book of Acts Jesus' ascension takes place forty days after the resurrection with the disciples watching. But in John's gospel Jesus says, "I am ascending." It is all in the present tense, describing an event

in process. All we can say for sure is that there was urgency in his words. Go and tell the others. And this is what she did. She went to the disciples with the news, “I have seen the Lord!” And did they believe her? **Of course not**. They did not believe until they too had an encounter with the risen Jesus.

The Eastern church considers Mary Magdalene equal to the apostles, because an apostle is a witness to the resurrection, and Mary was the first witness to the resurrection. She was also the first to be commissioned by Jesus to go and tell people. While women have tended to be pushed aside by cultural prejudice in the history of the Church, we must never forget that Jesus treated women as equals.

Jesus asked Mary, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” It’s not that he didn’t know the answer to the question. Mary was looking for the body of her Lord. What she found was the living Lord. Who are we looking for? What are we looking for? A God who becomes incarnate, dies and rises from the dead is not predictable. A Jesus stuck safely back in history can be studied in a remote and detached fashion, but a living Jesus who meets us in our prayers is much more challenging.

We have turned Easter into a safe and secular holiday full of bunnies and eggs. And I’m not trying to be a spoilsport here, because there is a place for bunnies and eggs. But bunnies and eggs are really remnants of early spring festivals, and have nothing to do with Jesus. Even the word “Easter” is pagan, very likely is derived from the name of a pagan goddess of Spring. Throughout most of the rest of the world Easter is known by other names—all derived from the word Pascha, which means “Passover.” It is only us English speakers who say “Easter.” And while we are probably not going to abandon the word “Easter” anytime soon, we do need to remember the staggering nature of what it is we are really celebrating. This is far more than a sacrificial death, as if that were not astounding in and of itself. The resurrection brings us the promise of a new and astounding life. No more disease. No more sickness. No more death. The resurrection gives us a future and a hope beyond the limitations of the world. Jesus was the first to be raised to new life, but not the last Amen

Isaiah 65:17-25

- 17 “See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
- 18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
- 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;

the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
20 “Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.
23 They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,
they and their descendants with them.
24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,”
says the Lord.

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.