

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25:6-9
SECOND LESSON: John 20:1-18
April 12, 2020
EASTER SUNDAY

“Defeating Death”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell preached online during the Coronavirus Emergency

Mary Magdalene was a strong woman. She was one of the leaders of the early church. She may have been stretched beyond normal human strength. She may have been sleep deprived and grieving deeply. But she was of sound mind, and she knew Jesus’ voice when she heard it. The last thing Mary expected was to see Jesus. She had watched him die and her entire world had collapsed. The man who she thought was invincible was gone. Her only thought was, *I have to do something . . .* and so she went to the tomb. Someone else had obviously prepared Jesus’ body for burial. It wasn’t the disciples. Joseph of Arimathea donated the tomb so it may have been his servants. Jesus’ followers didn’t know this because in the other gospel accounts we learn that the women went early in the morning with all that was needed to do just that.

John’s gospel only mentions Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb, although significantly she says to Simon Peter and John, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and **we** don’t know where they have put him!” Matthew’s gospel has Mary Magdalene and “another Mary.” Mark has Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas and Mary Salome. Luke’s gospel names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary of Jacob and “the other women.” Memories vary, but the initial group was clearly a group. As Mary and the others stood outside the tomb they knew that it could not get much worse, until it did. The stone had been removed from the entrance and his body was gone.

John’s gospel is focused on Mary Magdalene, and only tells us that she ran to get the others. Peter and John ran back to the tomb with her. They found it empty. Going inside were the grave clothes. Jesus was gone. After they left Mary stayed behind.

The tomb had been empty when Peter and John searched it. But when Mary looked again there were two men dressed in white inside. They were seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. And they asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

This was rapidly becoming the strangest day in Mary’s life. All she could think to say was, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him.” And as she turned around in a daze she saw another figure standing before her. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Mary was in such a state, her mind filled in the blanks. *He must be the gardener*, she thought. *Only the gardener would be here at this hour.* 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 was enough. 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.’” So she did what she was told. She went to the disciples and told them, “I have seen the Lord!”

We can imagine that the conversation between Jesus and Mary would have been much longer than this. Scripture just gives us the essentials, the outline of a conversation, not the whole thing. Oral tradition provides the gist 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 filled with hope and expectation.

The strongest proof of the truth of the resurrection is 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 going to go back to fishing. But then, out of nowhere, these fearful men and women were transformed into bold leaders, leaders willing to lay down their own lives to proclaim what they knew to be true.

These events took place around 2000 years ago. God’s kingdom plans are not the same as our kingdom plans. Our lives are relatively short. We want to see things accomplished in our lifetime, *preferably by next week*. We get discouraged when things do not happen quickly. If we had written the script the risen Jesus would have strolled right in to Herod’s Court with armies of angels at his side and watched Pilate have a heart attack on the spot. Jesus would have been interviewed on the Nightly News. News stations would be camped on the front lawns of the homes of the Roman soldiers, wanting an answer for how this one got by them. Witnesses to the resurrection would be on Twitter. Google earth would crash with so many people trying to see Jerusalem. And, we think, our way would have been much more successful. Everyone would see the truth and everyone would accept it. There would be no more ambiguity and no more feeling embarrassed for having faith. The truth of who Jesus is and why he came would be evident to all.

Except, that it wouldn’t. Consider the fact that while we have a pandemic going on there are still those who think it’s a conspiracy or an exaggeration. Political leaders say one thing on camera, and not long after deny that they ever said such a thing. Lies are believed even though the evidence that they are lies is right there. We can show the recording! In every nation people have an almost limitless talent for denying reality. There are those in China who allege that the U.S. army created the Coronavirus and introduced it into China. 5-G networks have been blamed for the Coronavirus in Britain. And my all-time favorite, I kid you not, is Pat Robertson, who alleges that the source of the Coronavirus is “lady chemicals” from (cover your children’s ears) oral sex.

There are people who actually believe that the holocaust never happened. There are people who are convinced that the world is flat. Denying the existence of global warming has become a corporate past-time. The human capacity for self-deception is inexhaustible. And aside from the fact that people can refuse to see what is right in front of them, at the heart of the matter there is a deeper 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 the truth, and sealed shut by the force of pride. In order for salvation to come, pride must go. Humility must take its place. So God did it God's way. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and appeared to his disciples. He spoke to Mary. He spoke to many others before ascending into heaven. He is alive, and through him death is ultimately defeated. But we cannot come to experience and understand this glorious truth through our own mental prowess. While there is certainly a place for discussions about the existence of God and ethics and philosophy, the most brilliant of minds cannot reach the mind of God. 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. 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 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 also will live. Because Jesus lives, death is defeated. 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.