

“An Encounter with the Resurrection”
John 20:1-18
March 27, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

The setting of this chapter is not inconsequential. John reports that it was at dawn on the first day of the week. I believe this is more than a description of the timing of the events he is about to describe. It is a dawning of a new day both literally and figuratively. With the resurrection of Jesus, the darkness that came upon the earth when the human race fell into sin is now being chased away. A new creation has begun to be realized, and it is staggeringly good news as even the process of death begins to be reversed. In today’s passage, we read how Mary Magdalene came to partake of this new era and how we can as well.

John loves to tell stories of people who have been changed forever after an encounter with Jesus. For example, much of John 3 describes a nighttime encounter with Nicodemus, while the next chapter is all about his interactions with the Samaritan woman. Today’s chapter describes three encounters Jesus had after his resurrection. All three lead to transformation at the deepest level. Mary was filled with grief at the death of Jesus, but by the end of this encounter with the resurrected Jesus her grief is replaced with joyful mission. The disciples are huddled in a room, and they are full of fear. Their master has been executed, and they’re afraid they’re next. But then Jesus shows up and their fear turns to gladness. Thomas is filled with doubt, but after his encounter with Jesus, his doubt turns to faith.

We’re going to look today at Mary’s story. There are many Mary’s in the New Testament, most famously the mother of Jesus. But there is also Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This Mary is neither of those two. She is Mary Magdalene, who appears only one other time in the New Testament. Luke tells us that among Jesus’ followers was a group of women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Then he names three of these women and includes **“Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out”** (Luke 8:2). Once more in our passage, Jesus finds her in misery, and once more, he leaves her full of joy. The same transformation comes to all who encounter the resurrected Jesus. So let’s take a look today at Mary’s encounter, one that ends in the same joy each of us will find following a genuine encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

I. Encountering the Evidence – v. 1-10

Mary is out early on this day, arriving at the tomb while it is still dark. Perhaps she had been unable to sleep, due to her overwhelming grief at the death of Jesus. Luke tells us that she was there to bring spices for the body of Jesus. Like many of us who encounter death, she didn’t know what else to do, so she

just did what she could. Upon arriving at the tomb, she immediately saw that something wasn't right. The stone had been rolled away. These tombs were essentially caves carved out of the side of a large rock. Over the opening would be placed a large, disk-like stone, set in a groove that would serve as a track in which the stone would roll. It was done in such a way that one would roll the stone downhill to close the tomb but uphill to open it. So several men would be required to open a tomb that had been closed. Mary sees the stone rolled back and immediately draws a conclusion: someone has taken Jesus' body. Without even looking inside the tomb, she runs to tell Peter and John, the author of this gospel who always describes himself as "the one whom Jesus loved."

In one of those details that marks this as an eyewitness account, we are told that Peter and John had a footrace to the tomb and John outran Peter. This detail was included not because it has anything to do with the central story but only because John remembered it as he was writing this gospel. John pauses at the entrance to the tomb. But Peter, slower perhaps because he was built more like a fullback than a wide receiver, arrives after John but then boldly enters into the tomb. John follows and both men see something they were not expecting. It is true that the body of Jesus is not there, but they immediately notice that all of his burial linen was still there. The missing body of Jesus could not be explained by grave robbers, because the whole point of robbing a grave was the value of the linens and spices wrapped around the body. Nor did it make any sense that the enemies of Jesus had taken his body. That's because of what John reports of the face cloth, or the turban that would have been wrapped around his head. Jewish burial practices were different than that of the Egyptians, who wrapped the entire head with these cloths. The Jews, though, left the face uncovered. A strip of cloth was passed under the chin to keep the jaw in place, and then wrapped around the head. What Peter and John saw was that this face cloth was still in the form it would be in if there was a head there. If Jesus' enemies had taken his body, even if they had for some strange reason decided to remove his burial linens prior to taking his body, the face cloth would not have been folded like this.

When John sees this evidence, we read that he believed. He hadn't yet seen from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus must be raised, and he hadn't yet seen the resurrected Jesus, both of which will happen shortly. But from the evidence alone, he concluded that Jesus had been raised. Most of us need more than that, not because of any deficiency with the evidence, but because of a deficiency within our own hearts. That was true of Mary as well. She is still holding on to her initial conclusion that Jesus' dead body had been taken.

II. Encountering the Lord – v. 11-16

The transformation of Mary came not from the evidence, but from a personal encounter with Jesus himself. After John and Peter left the tomb, Mary remains outside weeping. Then for the first time, she looks inside and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. They had not been there when Peter and

John were inside the tomb, and for some reason Mary seems not to recognize them as angels at first. They ask her why she is weeping. They know something she doesn't, that the reason for the empty tomb isn't what she thought, that the dead body of Jesus had been taken away by someone. Rather, Jesus walked out of that tomb on his own after being raised from the dead. To the angels, weeping at such a time as this was as inappropriate as a sad groom at his own wedding.

While Mary was speaking to the angels, Jesus walks up behind her. I would guess she notices his presence by the response of the angels. When I go to weddings, I like to watch the face of the groom when the doors are opened in the rear of the church and he first sees his bride as she walks down the aisle toward him. Most smile and a few shed tears of joy, but it is rare (and probably not a good sign for the future of the marriage) when there is no response on the part of the groom. These angels can't be in the presence of Jesus without reacting in some way, and Mary immediately turns to see what has distracted them. She sees Jesus, except she doesn't recognize him as Jesus. She thinks he is the gardener and thinks maybe he knows where the body of Jesus has been laid.

Why didn't Mary recognize Jesus at first? Her experience with the resurrected Jesus was not uncommon. It seems that Jesus' resurrection body was in some ways the same and in other ways different to the point of being unrecognizable. I think it's something like trying to identify us by our baby pictures. There is some continuity and sameness, but a great deal of difference too. The Bible teaches that our resurrection bodies will be like his, both similar and different from our current bodies.

Mary finally sees that it is Jesus after he speaks one word to her, her own name. She came to believe in the resurrected Jesus not through the evidence of the empty tomb or through the testimony of the Scriptures, but through a personal encounter with Jesus. Does this still happen today? For most of her brief life, the French philosopher Simone Weil was an agnostic. Listen to what she wrote in her collection of essays in *Waiting for God*.

In 1938... I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow... I discovered the poem... called "Love" [by George Herbert] which I learnt by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I made myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that Christ himself came down and took possession of me. In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God.

John tells us Mary's story not just because it's interesting, but because it tells us something of how we too, to quote Simone Weil, can have a real, person to person contact between ourselves and the living God. I see three parts of her

contact with Jesus that will lead us to have a relationship with the risen Lord. First, she has to be willing to look a little deeper into her heart. We can see that in the questions Jesus asks her. One thing you can always count on in the Bible is that God never asks questions in order to acquire information. Since he knows everything already, his questions are designed to disrupt our tendency to superficiality and get us to probe our own hearts more deeply. So he asks Mary first, **“Why are you weeping?”** He is attempting to get her to be honest about her emotions. It is as if Jesus is saying to her, “Tell me a little more about what you’re feeling.” Mary seemed to resist Jesus’ efforts to do this. She never answers his question, and doesn’t seem very interested in going down that road. If she had, perhaps she would have said something like this. “I’m crying because Jesus is dead. He made all the difference in my life when he cast out those seven demons that were possessing me. My life was so miserable before he came along, and I guess I’m a little fearful that now that he is gone, those demons are going to come back.”

If his first question invites Mary to be honest about her emotions, the second one invites her to be honest about her desires. **“Whom are you seeking?”** She was looking for the dead body of Jesus, hoping to find just a little comfort in being near his lifeless body. Had Mary been able to realize her desire, she would have found precious little comfort. Her true desires were the same as all of ours, to return to the paradise of Eden, where we can have open access to God without the shame of our sin and guilt.

The second thing Mary’s story teaches us about having a relationship with the risen Lord is the need to die to our own agenda regarding what we think will make us happy. Over and over again, Mary tells us what her agenda is that she thinks will satisfy her. She wants to find the dead body of Jesus. Mary’s first opinion about Jesus after his death—that his body had been taken from the tomb—is not easily dislodged. Even after seeing angels and Jesus himself (though she doesn’t at first recognize him as Jesus), she holds on to this conclusion. I have noticed that people often respond similarly to Jesus, holding on to an early conclusion about him, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. He can be ignored because so many of his followers are hypocrites. He is a great teacher, or just a figure from childhood Sunday School classes who has very little to do with one’s adult world. How about you? What do you think it will take to make you happy? If it’s anything less than a loving relationship with the living Lord, you are like Mary seeking a dead body.

The third thing we learn from Mary is our need to hear the voice of Jesus speaking to us in a personal way. You may be thinking, “But Mary’s case was unique because she was alive during that brief time when the resurrected Jesus walked the earth. But Jesus taught earlier a truth recorded by John, that **“My sheep hear my voice”** (10:27). Jesus still speaks today, and he does so often through the preaching of the Bible. It may be that he is speaking to you right now, calling your name to give up your agenda for what makes you happy and turn to Jesus.

III. Encountering a New Mission – v. 17-18

After Mary recognizes the voice of Jesus, she runs to him and hugs him in some way, indicated by Jesus' words to her not to cling to him. Jesus doesn't criticize her for hugging him when he says "Do not cling to me." He is commenting on the timing. Because he has not yet ascended to the Father, it is more appropriate that she go with a message to his disciples. Curiously, the message is not, "I have risen from the dead." Rather, the message refers to his ascension. **"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"** (v. 17).

This is full of significance. The new creation Jesus came to establish will proceed under his authority. When he ascends, he goes to the place of rule and authority. Mary need worry no more about the return of those seven demons who had tormented her, because Jesus has all authority over the demons. What a turnaround! The Saturday before resurrection Sunday had been the best day in the existence of Satan. His scheme to remove the rightful king of the earth had succeeded, and the whole earth was now open to him to do his destructive work against the vile image bearers of God. But now everything has changed. Jesus has been raised from the dead and will ascend into heaven. He will have all authority now in heaven and on the earth. The ancient prophecy has been fulfilled, and the head of the serpent has now been crushed.

It is also significant that he refers to God the Father as **"my Father and your Father."** Jesus has opened once again the door to paradise. We are no longer orphans because God is now our Father. This answers the question of what happens to a person when they die. Jesus has gone to be with his heavenly Father, and now he gives us the right to call God our Father. We will go where Jesus has gone before us. The fairy tales are true. The beast is transformed when loved by a person of beauty. The frog turns into a prince, and all live happily ever after.

CONCLUSION:

In his book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller says this about the importance of the resurrection of Jesus. "Sometimes people approach me and say, 'I really struggle with this aspect of Christian teaching. I like this part of Christian belief, but I don't think I can accept that part.' I usually respond: 'If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.'" I declare to you today that He has risen and is alive even now. Hope is alive.