

Easter Sermon 2021

John Collins

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

¹ 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. ² 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." ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² 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. ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.'" ¹⁸ 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

SERMON

UPSET: Do you know what a spoiler is? I love spoilers because I hate surprises.

DEEPENING: Whether or not you like spoilers, we all know the ending to this story.

We've heard it more times than we can count

and the happy ending was probably the first part of the story we learned.

But that wasn't the case for Mary Magdalene. She came to the tomb to grieve.

When she found the tomb empty. She sought help from Simon and the other disciple.

But they both left after seeing for themselves that the tomb was empty.

And Mary was again by herself. At the tomb. Alone with her grief.

She encountered the angels/messengers, but missed their significance.

Then she saw what she thought was the gardener. Why did she think he was the gardener?

Because she was in a garden and when she found the tomb empty,

she didn't immediately believe that Jesus is risen from the dead,

instead she thought that the body had been taken away.

And this was a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

Medical knowledge was not as advanced in first century Jerusalem as it is now,
but everyone knew that crucifixion killed and dead people stayed dead.

Those who believed in resurrection were waiting for the end of time when all the dead would be resurrected all at once, they were not expecting one person to be raised all by themselves midway through history.

Nothing in Mary's belief system led her to expect Jesus' resurrection.

Not even Jesus predicting it.

Faced with a few cryptic predictions vs widespread experience, the latter won out.

So Mary wasn't looking for Jesus to be up walking around,

and she doesn't recognize him when she sees him.

Indeed, She doesn't recognize her risen Lord until he calls her by name.

GOSPEL/SUDDEN SHIFT: And in that moment of joyous surprise everything changed.

UNPACKING: I don't like surprises, but God is full of them.

Examples: Sarah, as an old woman, finally bore a child. The waters of the Red Sea parted so fleeing slaves could cross on dry land. The shepherd boy David defeated Goliath and became king. Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego were joined by a fourth person in the fiery furnace and were not consumed by fire. Daniel emerged from the lions' den without a scratch. The Word became flesh and walked among us.

Jesus Christ went through death and came out the other side more alive than ever.

And in doing so he opened up a whole world of new possibilities.

And I do mean a whole world—we tend to see the cross only in terms of Jesus securing the forgiveness of our sins, but that's not the whole story.

He confronted and defeated the evil power of sin, dealt death a mortal blow,
and then rose victorious from the grave.

That's a victory that encompasses all of the cosmos, all of the created universe.

The main indication that more than just the forgiveness of our sins is going on: the garden, the gardner, the first day of the week (mentioned 2x in 20:1 and 20:19).

Two main things: 1. Salvation includes eternal life,
but the final form is that of glorious resurrected bodies in a (re-)newed cosmos.
2. It's already begun, the beginning of this new creation isn't in the distant future,
but instead took place on that Sunday so long ago.

The effects are personal, they are cosmic, and they are also communal for us as a church.

This church is now starting to stir after a year of hunkering down during a pandemic.

God's perfectly capable of doing new things here. God wants to do new things here.

But God wants us to be a part of those new things.

Are we open to surprises? Are we open to the unexpected?

Are we open to new life and new creation? Are we open to resurrection?

Let us open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to see the Risen Lord standing before us.

Amen.