

What Mary Saw

John 20:1-18

FOCUS: The Risen Christ calls us by name

FUNCTION:

Prayer for Illumination

John 20:1-18

*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**. 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!"*

*So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but **the other disciple outran Peter** and reached the tomb first. He bent over and **looked in at the strips** of linen lying there but **did not go in**.*

*Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, **arrived and went into the tomb**. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally **the other disciple**, who had reached the tomb first, **also went inside**. He **saw and believed**. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)*

Then the disciples went back to their homes,

*but **Mary stood outside** the tomb **crying**. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and **saw two angels** in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.*

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." At this, **she turned around and saw Jesus standing** there, **but she did not realize** that it was Jesus.*

"Woman," he said, "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."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

*She turned toward him and **cried out** in Aramaic, "**Rabboni!**" (which means Teacher).*

*Jesus said, "**Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'**"*

***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.*

Sermon

Jesus' question to Mary is just as important today as it was when it was first uttered:

"Who is it that you are looking for?"

On this Easter morning,
 where we've **gone to all the trouble** of
 getting up on a weekend morning,
 made a particular effort to **pick out our nicer suits**,
 taken some **extra time** on our hair and make-up
wrestled the kids into cute outfits that will be stained by
 noon.
just what have we come to see?

What do we expect to happen to us while we're here?

The same old story?
 Familiar Easter hymns?
 The same old shushing match with the kids?
 Going home to the same rat-race.

Is there any chance that we've gathered here to look for God?

(Pastors, in their flurry of Sunday morning activity,
 are not exempt from this question!)

Ask yourself, honestly now!:

What have you come this morning to see?

This question is asked to a woman who witnesses an awful lot that first Easter morning.

Mary Magdalene:

Listed **first in every listing of Jesus' female disciples**,
perhaps even the leader of the group of women who
 followed Jesus to help facilitate his and his disciples'
 ministry.

The one from whom **Jesus evicted seven demons**, according
 to Luke's Gospel.

The very first to see the resurrected Jesus and
 the very **first to proclaim that Good News** to others.

She certainly didn't get what she expected!

She was there with some of the other women (other Gospels
 talk about the whole group of them, and Mary reports
 to the disciples that "we don't know where they have put
 them.")

There to pay respect to the one they'd followed and loved.

They had **come to honor Jesus with spices**;
 an **act of devotion in memory** of Jesus.

They'd **come to grieve and tell stories**.

They **came to visit a dead god**.

They did not come to see a resurrection.

I don't know if you've ever been broken into...

Or watched a **car wreck** happen.

Or have **seen an angry brawl break out**.

Or come across something so out of the normal routine that your heart skipped a couple of beats as you were riveted to the spot.

But I imagine that is something of what Mary felt.

Stunned shock; painful dismay at what appeared to be a ransacking of a beloved friend and leader's tomb.

Your brain bursts into activity, desperately searching for an explanation or the cause or reason for things;

Something to reel in the shock;

to bring **order** to this new and sudden **disorder**:

Was it **grave robbers**?

The **gardener** who didn't know what he was doing?

Or maybe **even the Jewish leaders**, trying to increase their misery; some **ploy** to make the disciples look like fools .

Nevertheless, there it was:

a tomb, now empty,

it's stone doorway much too heavy to be moved by just anyone,

now **ajar**, leaving the **mouth yawing wide**,
eagerly **revealing its lack of contents**.

So Mary runs to tell the disciples and comes across two familiar characters:

Simon Peter – always **eager** to please Jesus yet equally **bumbling** in his faith.

Remember he **denied** ever knowing Jesus when accused of being his followers, **only a few days before**.

Then there's "**disciple that Jesus loved**", which we know as the Gospel writer himself, **John**.

As one present at the crucifixion, the **grisly images** of Jesus' suffering **must still haunt** his dreams.

But what's this? The tomb broken into?!

And **they run** for everything they're worth,
John, being younger, outstripping Peter.

He's cautious, though. Perhaps waiting respectfully for the older Peter. Certainly flooded with his own shock, he dare not dive in,

as if to avoid disturbing a crime scene, for surely some great wrong is done.

But he can see some vacant strips of linen.

He too comes to find what he did not expect.

Peter wastes no time, dashing into the tomb,
the first across the threshold.

The view from inside reveals **not only linen strips** but the **head-wrapping**, now no longer wrapping Jesus' head!

He **sees the evidence** but doesn't know what to make of it.

He **has the most to fear if indeed Jesus has returned** from the dead; being the one who publically refused ever knowing the Savior of the world.

What are we here this Easter Sunday to see? An Empty tomb?

Are we here to pay our respects to a dead god?

One **who sounds great and all on paper** but is **nowhere** to be seen at work, or on the news (except for some particular vocal parts of his people).

Who **gets a quick word around the dinner table** that's holding a hasty microwave dinner

But seeming **not manifest in any remarkable ways in our daily routine?**

Maybe we want to just come and **pay our respects to Jesus,**

thank him for being such a great guy, a wise moral teacher, and get on with our lives.

Maybe we're **here hoping to get some hard evidence** before we're truly buy into the Jesus **thing**.

For a "thing" is all the tomb is: an empty thing.

Of course, **faith in a "thing" is much easier than a dangerous, untamed newly-risen God.**

That kind of God **might ask things of us;**

Might **want us to change** our routine and values that we work so hard to keep together as it is.

But where is our shock? Where is our stunned silence at the ludicrous, entirely unscientific scandal of a resurrected God?

Maybe we've heard the story; know how it goes already and so it's lost its shock value?

Maybe again we should take our cues from Mary.

For **she lingers** a while;

in **the blazing spring dawn** so contrary to the grief pouring out of her.

In light of this horrific news, it seems **she doesn't know what else to do**

Yet like rubberneckers on the highway, can't seem to take her eyes off the scene.

But her waiting is not in vain:

Angels are **God's messengers.**

(In fact, the Greek word literally means "messenger")

God sends them ahead of major events to let folks know what is happening.

Other Gospels offer more details. In Matthew's account, one of the angels offers such a pronouncement:

*"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."
(Matt.28:5b, 6)*

So indeed, they are there to **pave the way for Jesus' great, unlikely appearance on the stage.**

John offers us different details of the interaction, them kindly asking why she is crying.

"They've **taken him,**" she stammers through her tears.

Him: who so many hopes and dreams had ridden.

Him: who delivered her from her demons when nothing else could.

Him: who was going to change everything.

***And suddenly, the angel's job is done. For there He is:
Jesus himself has appeared.***

But whether because her eyes are clouded with tears,
Or maybe the dawning sun is blazing in her eyes
Or some other mystery masks Jesus' face and voice.

She doesn't recognize him. The Gardener maybe.
In her desperation to find Jesus,
she immediately barter to take care of things.

Ironic, isn't it? That Jesus was right there all along in plain view.

But then, recognition does come.

Not in a miraculous moment or a display of heavenly power.
But **in her name**. Mary.
That's all it took.

**Like a lost child, frightening and alone,
suddenly hears the call of the concerned, searching parent.**

That small explosion that happens in their heart through
their despair, in the loneliness,
the first knowledge that everything is going to be
alright.

That the child is finally going home.

And like the lost child, she cries back:

"Rabboni!!" (which means Teacher or Master)

"Don't cling to me..." Jesus responds.

Indeed, Mary, he's changed now.

He's not just a Teacher any more.

Do not cling to your old picture of him.

Because now he is new; fulfilled his duty and overcome sin
and death for the sake of the world.

He actually is **the Gardner and the True Vine, tending to the
souls of humanity**

He is no longer the crucified and dead Jesus

But the Risen Christ; the true Son of God the Father

The proven conqueror of your demons and ours.

He is not a thing. He is not hollow like a tomb.

He is Jesus: God alive and alive forever more.

Just what have we come here this Easter to see?

The same old story? Made all-too-familiar by dozens and dozens of Easters long past?

Or are we here to meet the living, breathing Risen God?

Have we come, like the disciples,

to stand here in wonder for a little while

but then to go back home,
not sure what to believe?

Or are we here because deep down,

**We know the empty tomb is our hearts,
broken and tired, full of death,
longing for something more.**

When we're brave enough to look in,
we know something isn't right.

Are we here because

we really want to know what happens to Jesus?

And how that matters to us?

(Because, believe me, it does)

Because Jesus is here.

Calling you by name,

Like a mother calling to a child lost in the woods.

Maybe we've been just like Mary,

expecting one thing

but all along staring Jesus in the face

The question you need to ask yourself is what is getting in the way if seeing the Jesus that is standing before you right now?

The tears of your own grief and sorrow?

Some kind of proof that Jesus is worth believing in?

Some guarantee that Jesus won't ask you to change?

Some harm done by others who follow Jesus or some false picture of an angry, vindictive God inherited from others.

Some bitterness that has shrouded your hardened heart that does not trust easily.

There is a difference between faith in the tomb and faith in the crucified Jesus, now living and breathing.

One is a thing

and **one is a God who wants us to know him & his love.**

One is evidence

and **one is the thing to which the evidence points.**

Faith in a thing is simple.

Like a science experiment:

you study it, get the cold facts and move on.

That's **the easy way out this morning.**

Nodding to the facts

and going back to what you've always known.

Faith in a living, breathing God does demand something of us.

It demands some **waiting.**

It requires some **listening.**

It requires **some changing** of our ideas.

But that is a **small price compared to what we gain in knowing Jesus**; in putting our faith in a living, breathing God returned from the dead and calling him Savior and Friend.

Because that God is here, now.

The same Jesus revealed to us in this story is the God at work in this very room; meeting us in the empty hollow tomb of our hearts, wanting to fill it with joy and peace and purpose.

Mary does not stop there.

She runs to give a report.

This is perhaps one of the **greatest challenges to learning how to relate to a living God:**

Learning how to tell others about it.

We call the Gospel "Good News" for a very good reason.

Because **Easter is not simply a scientific anomaly.**

It is the day human history was changed forever.

This is the day God proved unequivocally that he's on our side:

That **he wants us to find that purest joy** which comes when we have the courage to look Jesus in the face,

The living breathing Son of God who died for us

and worship him and love him.

We too must give a report, even to those who, like Simon and John, consider themselves followers but do not understand.

We need to remind each other boldly of who we serve.

Mary tells them, "I have seen the Lord!"

And so have we:

Not just the evidence, not just memorized a Bible story.

Christ himself at work in our hearts and in our church.

I don't know what you came to find this morning.

A dead god. A familiar story.

But I hope you leave having seen Jesus face-to-face.

My prayer is that you too will have Easter in your lives:

A resurrection from death to life that only God can give.

That will fill the emptiness in your life.

Come to him, the living Christ,

Who died to do what we could never do:

Put us in touch with the very personal God who wants to
be alive in and through you.

Come to him, the Risen Savior,

Who is anxious and ready to reveal himself in his fullest glory
if we would but hear him calling our name.

He is calling your name.