



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Lord! John 20

Sermon by: Robert Austell
Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

Today is Easter Sunday! Jesus is risen; he is risen, indeed!

The heart of what I want to share with you today are Good News and grace. Those are familiar Christian terms, but I've seen them freshly in this familiar account of Easter morning in the Gospel of John. Jesus' resurrection is Good News because it happened *whether we understand it or not*, and in fact, whether we are even looking for the right thing or not. And Jesus' resurrection is grace because God offers it and its benefits to us whether we understand it or not, and whether we are even looking for the right thing or not.

I want to look at four examples in the story of people misunderstanding or looking in the wrong place for Jesus, because I see myself in them. I see us in them. I see humanity in them. And you know what, they don't have to understand or find their way to Jesus. He explains and seeks them out; and that's what he does with us as well.

Honoring a Great Man (v.1a)

¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark...

Mary Magdalene came early on Sunday morning to the tomb. The other gospels fill in some information: there were other women with her and they were bringing spices to anoint Jesus' body. (Mark 16:1) It is no contradiction that John doesn't mention the other women. He is focused on Mary's story and how she interacted with the disciples and with Jesus. But what I want to focus on is this snapshot in time. She did not yet know what had happened. She came to Jesus to honor him as a dead teacher (and friend).

Many view Jesus in this way. He was a great and influential moral teacher due honor and respect. But he is dead and gone. And lest we in our church clothes think, “That’s what unbelievers say,” I find that even within the church we can relegate Jesus to that status. We study his teachings and life, but we remain unaffected by the reality and power of what he has done in life and death and life again. Mary was as devoted as they come, but she did not yet understand.

Eager to See What’s Going On (vv.1b-10)

...and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.” ³ So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. ⁶ And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

Seeing the stone taken away and concluding “they have taken away the Lord” (v.2), Mary ran to get Peter and John (aka “the other disciple whom Jesus loved”). Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves, entering to examine the linen wrappings and face-cloth. There are very specific details about the placement of things, as only an eye-witness might provide. We read in verse 8 that John “saw and believed,” but this must be belief that the body was missing, not of the resurrection, because the next verse says “as yet they did not understand.”

Peter and John, like many, are eager to check out Jesus and faith, but don’t stick around or dig deeper or study the scripture to connect all the dots. It might be a stretch, but it makes me think of the way people are drawn to programs, whether music or potlucks or service projects or other church activities. Hear me clearly; there is nothing wrong with any of that. In fact,

kudos to Peter and John for *running* to see what was going on. But those things are not substitutes for personal faith and belief. You can't potluck your way into the Kingdom of God. Loving the music or singing in the choir or even leading it don't save you. They can be wonderful expressions of faith, but there has to be more. And that day Peter and John did not find what they were looking for and they "went away again to their own homes." (v.10) They likely even shared the news of the missing body, but they could not share what they did not yet understand.

Doubly Lost (vv.11-15)

¹¹ But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because 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, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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."

The scene reverts back to Mary, weeping now outside the tomb. She looks in and sees two angels. (Peter and John must not have stuck around long enough to see the angels!) She also then encounters a man whom she thinks is the gardener. In answer to both the angels and then the man, Mary explains that she is weeping because not only is Jesus missing, but she doesn't know where he has been taken. Not only is Jesus dead, but now he is lost to her as well.

I am reminded of those who perhaps had faith when they were younger, but then lost touch with God for one reason or another. Maybe it was a great disappointment with God or some other way God "died" to you. And now, like Mary, you are not even sure where to look. It's like God is now doubly-removed from you. I remember a period in my life like that.

Clinging (vv.16-17)

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging

to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' ”

The story shifts dramatically in verse 16, when Jesus calls Mary's name. He knows her and she recognizes him. It is fascinating to wonder why she did not recognize him at first and then did. Did he look different? Was she too overwhelmed with her own grief to pay real attention to who was standing in front of her? We don't really know, although there are other accounts of Jesus being among people, unrecognized at first and then doing or saying something familiar and becoming known. Maybe it's just that people's minds and senses couldn't make the leap from a public execution to resurrection and new life.

But that's not what I want to focus on. I want to focus on what Jesus said to Mary. It wasn't "There, there; I'm okay." Or "Hey, I'm alive!!" He said, "Stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." (v.17) It is not a matter of not being able to touch Jesus, because later in this same chapter in John he tells Thomas to touch his hands and side. Rather, Jesus seems to be saying, "I can't stay here with you" particularly with what follows about going to be with the Father. Books have been written about what all that means, but for today I'll put it in a simpler way that we can hopefully appreciate.

In this verse Mary called Jesus "Teacher." He was that, but he was more than that. He was the risen Lord, soon to be at the right hand of God the Father. I think we can err in two ways. If we are holding on to a version of Jesus that is less than risen Lord and Savior, then we need to let go of that and take him on his own terms. And if we are trying to sanctify our own plans, philosophies, preferences, and politics by roping Jesus to our cause, then I believe he would say, "Stop clinging to me."

Truly, we are supposed to "hold fast to Jesus" but that means obedience and allegiance to Jesus for who he says he is and where he says he is going, not the other way around. If following Jesus comes up against our preferences, politics, plans, or philosophies, then they need to yield to the Savior and Lord.

Good News and Grace (vv. 17b-21)

'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' ”¹⁸
*Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.*¹⁹ *So when it was*

evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

I began by saying that Good News and grace were at the heart of this passage.

That Good News is that Jesus is not a teacher from history past, a failed revolutionary, dead, or stolen away. Jesus is risen, alive, and at the right hand of God the Father in Heaven. In his own words to Mary and the disciples, He was ascending, on his way to the right hand of God the Father, no longer walking among us. There he is rightfully King of kings and Lord of lords. It is what God promised David, that one of his line would reign forever. It's what we sang at the beginning of the service in the echoes of the Hallelujah chorus.

The great grace at the heart of these stories is this: it is not up to us to comprehend or discover new life. It is God's gift to us. Mary wasn't left weeping at a friend's grave because Jesus came to her, called her by name, and lifted her up with a story to tell. Peter and John weren't left convinced that Jesus body was missing because they left the scene too quickly. Jesus came TO them, hidden away in a room with the other disciples. It's not in this story, but Jesus didn't abandon Thomas when he missed the first show and tell and didn't believe. Jesus came back again to Thomas and invited him to touch his hands and side. And Jesus didn't leave Mary (or us) clinging to the wrong savior. He spoke to her, rebuked her, and called her onward with a mission to share the Good News.

Likewise, Jesus not only comes to us despite our misunderstandings and misplaced allegiances, he invites us again and again to trust and follow him. He even has work for us to do: "As the Father has sent me, I also send you." (v.21)

In the coming weeks we are going to dig into God's grace and the mission He has for us as we follow the risen Jesus Christ. Come back for more! Amen.