

The Resurrection of our Lord; Easter Dawn; April 7, 2020

+ John 20:1-18 +

“Jesus Speaks His Brothers’ and Sisters’ Names”

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she left and ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” she told them, “and we don’t know where they put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. Bending over, he saw the linen clothes lying there, yet he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter, who was following him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the linen clothes lying there. The cloth that had been on Jesus’ head was not lying with the linen cloths, but was folded up in a separate place by itself. Then the other disciple, who arrived at the tomb first, also entered. He saw and believed. (They still did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their home.

But Mary stood outside facing the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she bent over, looking into the tomb. She saw two angels in white clothes sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. They asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She told them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”

After she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you carried him off, tell me where you have laid him, and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and replied in Aramaic, “*Rabboni!*” (which means “Teacher”).

Jesus told her, “Do not continue to cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father – to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” She also told them the things he had said to her.

In the middle of St. John’s account of Easter morning, there is a statement in parentheses. There was no such thing as parentheses in the language St. John wrote in, so the decision to make the statement parenthetical is the translator’s decision, and most translators do. But I do not understand that decision.

I don't think verse nine is parenthetical at all. Instead, it is the key to understanding everything that happens in the first fifteen, very sad verses of John chapter 20.

Mary Magdalene finds Jesus' tomb empty in the dark. And she runs to Peter and John with her interpretation of that empty tomb: **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she told them, "and we don't know where they put him!"**

Then they start running. The younger and faster John reaches the tomb first, and eventually the older and slower Peter gets there too. Together they learn that Mary is right about Jesus being gone, but wrong about why. Writing about himself, John says: **He saw and believed.** Now, finally, John and Peter put it together.

Inexplicably, they leave without telling Mary what Jesus' absence really means. Either they didn't see her standing outside the tomb, or maybe they were just thoughtless. So Mary will learn that Jesus lives a different way. Unlike others on Easter morning, she will not hear it from an angel. She will hear it from Jesus himself.

But not right away. First, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. **Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping! Who are you looking for?"**

Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you carried him off, tell me where you laid him, and I will get him." Brilliant, Mary! When bodies go missing, no one ever suspects the gardener.

What explains all this running and confusion and weeping and strange thinking? It is the parenthetical statement that is not so parenthetical. **(They still did not understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.)** The Old Testament prophesied the Messiah's resurrection; the Messiah himself predicted it multiple times. That made Jesus' resurrection a **must**. But they **still did not understand**. Here is the reason for the confusion and weeping and insinuations of body-snatching.

There is still a lot of fear and confusion and weeping and accusations that happen around graves, especially when people do not understand that Jesus had to rise on Easter, and that he did. Death is pure terror without Easter. Not only is it scary, it's confusing. Why does life have to end? Is there any part of me that lives on? Based on all the evidence I can see, my body will be done for good, but will any part of me last? And there's weeping without Easter, too. And it's the worst kind, the kind of mourning that only a permanent goodbye can trigger. And without Jesus' resurrection, around tombs there are even accusations, not against gardeners but against God. How dare you take away someone I love! How dare you take away people who are young and healthy! If you're out there, what a cold and cruel being you must be!

When the two disciples found the empty tomb, they finally understood that Jesus had to rise from the dead. They understood, finally, and they believed. But as we will see next Sunday, their faith in Jesus' resurrection was far from perfect. And that is true for every Christian. We do understand Jesus had to rise. And we know he did. But our faith, too, wavers and bends at times. And so, even though our faith in Jesus knows better, we too fear death. It confuses us and leaves us uncertain. It sometimes leaves us mourning,

like the rest of the people, who have no hope. And it can even lead Jesus' people to accuse God of bad timing or unfairness when death comes.

On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene still does not understand. But then the alleged gardener says one word. If there is one word in the Bible I would most like to hear the audio of, this is it: **Jesus said to her, "Mary."** When Jesus says one word, just her name, everything comes clear for Mary. And she does what we would expect. She hugs Jesus. And she apparently holds on for quite some time, until Jesus finally has to say: **"Do not continue to cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father – to my God and your God.'"**

Jesus has done what needed to be done on Good Friday, when he suffered and died for the sins of the world. Now he has done what had to be done on Easter morning, when he rose from the dead. But there is still more for him to do. In forty days, he will return to the side of Father and continue to work for his people. And those disciples were Jesus' people, his family. He calls them brothers, with the same Father as Jesus himself.

And we are Jesus' people, too. We are his brothers and sisters, members of his Father's family of believers. After Jesus' ascended into heaven, he saw you and me. In baptism's waters, when the name of the Triune God was spoken over you, Jesus called you by name. Everything he did for you on this earth – the holy life, the sacrifice of Good Friday, and the victory of Easter – he made it all yours personally when he gave you faith in him.

We are Jesus' family. He knows us by name and still calls us by name in his heavenly kingdom. He still looks at us in love and calls us his brothers and sisters, the family he died and rose for. And because Jesus did the work to save us and called us into his family, we will hold on to him forever. Mary had to let go of Jesus; he had things to do for the next forty days, including appearing to people over and over and over, people who then universally stuck to their conviction that he rose in the flesh. Then he had a place to go to: his heavenly kingdom, his Father's side. But eventually Mary Magdalene followed him there, and there she gets to hug him forever, and hear him call her by name once again.

And that is true of every member of Jesus' family, every one he graciously calls by name. We will follow him there, too, and hold on to Jesus forever, and hear him call us by name.

Christians know and believe this. We do have doubts and weakness in our faith, as the disciples did on Easter. But every time we hear Jesus' loving voice as we hear the story of his victory over death, he is working to make our faith more perfect. And the stronger he makes our faith, the more we will see death the right way. When your risen Savior looks you in the eye and calls you by name, you know death is nothing to fear, because Jesus beat it. And this is how amazing Jesus is! He takes the most frightening thing in the world and turns it into something beautiful. Because he died for our sins, our physical death is not the end. It is the beginning of a better life holding onto Jesus in heaven. Our physical death is not even the end for our bodies. Jesus physically rose, and promises that he will raise us, too. We don't sweat the science. God invented science, so he'll make it work.

Our confusion about death dies, and certainty rises in its place. With Job we declare, **“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. I will see him with my own eyes, I and not another.”** We do not have to wonder what will become of us. We know that our Redeemer lives, and so we will, too.

And when one of Jesus’ brothers or sisters, whom he loves and calls by name, enters his eternal embrace, or course we will be sad. Because physical death is not what God had in mind for Adam and Eve or any of their billions of descendants. It hurts and separates. So it is right to mourn – but not like people without hope. Christian hope is pure confidence: because Jesus lives, we too will live. Even in the sadness of death there is joy in Jesus’ love, knowing the ones we love now hear him speak their names in person, and hold on to him.

And even when the timing of a Christian’s departure may not make sense to us, we will of course never accuse God of making some kind of mistake or taking someone too soon. There is no bad time to meet Jesus in person, to wrap your arms around him and cling to him forever. There is no wrong time for you, or for anyone you love to receive that joy in heaven. Whenever God decides, we respond with thanksgiving for Jesus’ saving work, and his call to faith and God’s family.

Mary received a gift that a very small percentage of Jesus’ people did: she got to see Jesus in the flesh after he rose. She and several hundred more got that privilege. It is a small number compared to the total size of Jesus’ family, all his brothers and sisters. We see him by faith, not by sight. We trust the Spirit’s testimony in the Scripture, and the testimony of those like Mary who did see him their eyes. Jesus calls us first to believe, and later to see. And we will.

Because he lives, we too shall live. Whoever believes in him lives for eternity. Now we cling to him by faith, and there will see him and cling to him forever. Now by faith we hear him lovingly call us by name. There we will look him in the eye as he says to each one of us our own names. His brothers and sisters, for whom he died and rose. Amen.