

## EASTER 2008

Experiencing the Risen Christ  
(John 20:1-18)Pastor Jerry Truex  
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**A. Introduction**

Today, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. In church tradition, today is referred to as the Eighth Day. The day of Christ's resurrection is both the first day of the week, the memorial of the first day so creation, and the "eighth day," on which Christ after his "rest" on the great Sabbath inaugurates the day without end. Because the Christian community is the community of the resurrection, the church shifted its worship pattern from the Sabbath to Sunday.

In celebration of Easter, we read John 20:1-18. The text can be divided into two main parts:

- Mary Magdalene's and the empty tomb (1-10)
- Mary's encounter with Jesus (11-18)

**B. The Empty Tomb (1-10)****1. Mary's report: "I don't see the body"**

The first part of the narrative focuses on Mary's report that she did not see the body. The body of Jesus is missing.

Mary Magdalene came from the village of Magdala (north of Tiberius). She is mentioned as one of several women who followed Jesus devoutly (Lk 8:1-3). Matthew tells us that Jesus had expelled numerous demons from her and, along with other women, followed Jesus to Jerusalem (Mt 27:55). And, unlike many of the male disciples, Mary was so bold as to stand by Jesus even as he was crucified (Jn 19:25). She was very grateful to Jesus; she loved him, and she was undoubtedly brave.

Jesus was crucified on a Friday and we are told that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared his body and placed him in a tomb. Unable to visit on the Sabbath or Saturday (because it was the day of rest), Mary Magdalene (and other women) went to the tomb very early on Sunday morning.

**2. What did Mary Magdalene see?**

We are told that Mary Magdalene saw the stone had been rolled away from the tomb and, apparently terrified, ran to tell Peter. She may have thought one of two things.

- She may have thought that the Romans had taken Jesus' body
- She may have thought that tomb-robbers had broken in<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grave robbing was so common that Emperor Claudius made it a capital offense. So Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 324.

Mary reports, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." The use of "we" suggests that Mary was with other women, who are mentioned in the Synoptics.

Peter and the Beloved Disciple (the "other disciple") immediately sprint to the tomb. The Beloved Disciple gets there first, but let's Peter enter ahead of him.

### 3. What did Peter and the other disciple see?

We are told that both Peter and the other disciple see the linen wrappings—the burial cloth used to wrap Jesus' body—lying on the stone platform where the body would have been laid.

We are also told that they see the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was rolled up and put in a certain place. It's likely that this is the cloth that is wrapped under the chin and tied on the top of the head to keep the mouth closed.

### 4. What's up with the burial clothes?

It indicates that the body had been there because the burial clothes were there—but now the body was gone. The burial clothes also indicate that someone probably had not stolen the body. If someone had stolen the body, they probably would have carried the body out in the burial clothes or else the clothes would have been strewn on the ground.

But, in this scene, linens are neatly laid out and the face cloth is neatly rolled up. It was a sign that what had happened was not a mistake or accidental. It has not been robbers who removed the body. Rather, what has happened stems from God's power. At this point in the story, the narrator tells us that the other disciples saw this and "he believed."

### 5. What did the Beloved Disciple believe?

Throughout the Gospel, the word, "believe" (*pisteuō*) indicates a complete faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The empty tomb becomes one of the many signs that Jesus does throughout the Gospel that leads people to see that he is God's Agent and Messiah for the world.<sup>3</sup>

The beloved Disciple is an example of faith. He doesn't need decisive proof; the empty tomb is enough for him to trust that Jesus is Lord. As John later says, As John says: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29b).

The beloved Disciple is an example of one who is blessed; he has not seen an appearance of Jesus, but he believes.

Obviously, John was addressing Christians of his time who were complaining that, if Jesus were alive, how come they couldn't see him. How are they expected to believe

<sup>2</sup> I.e., the absolute use of *pisteuō* as in 5:44; 6:47.

<sup>3</sup> In John, seven signs are performed and then the eighth sign, the empty tomb: 1. Water into wine (2:1-11), 2. Healing the official's son (4:46-54), 3. Healing paralyzed man at the pool (5:2-9), 4. Multiplication of loaves (6:1-14), 5. Healing the man born blind (9:1-7), 6. The raising of Lazarus (11:1-44), 7. The crucifixion (19:1-37), and 8. The empty tomb (20:1-29). Each sign leads to belief. In the last case, the beloved disciple sees the empty tomb and believes. The crucifixion is the climax and the culmination of the signs which Jesus gives, following the sevenfold sequence of the old creation. Now, on the eighth day, comes the eighth sign; the new creation bursts forth on the old. The theme of believing runs throughout the Gospel. The verb, "to believe" (*pisteuein*) occurs 99 times and comes to fulfillment in this resurrection chapter. At the end of the chapter, the author concludes: "These things are written so that you may believe, and in believing, have life" (20:31).

Jesus is real, if they couldn't see his body? John responds by reminding them of the Beloved Disciple, who believed without physically seeing.

We don't need to see or hear or touch Jesus to believe that he is Lord and the Revealer of God.

### C. Encounter with Jesus (11-18)

When we turn to part 2—Mary's encounter with Jesus.

#### 1. Mary's enlightenment

Notice that Mary has come back to the tomb. She took her message to Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and then she returns. At this point, Peter and the Beloved Disciple leave, but not Mary.

Beginning with verse 11, we can see *gradual process of enlightenment* for Mary. She is still overcome with grief, but she has enough courage to look into the tomb.

#### 2. Looking into the tomb

What does Mary see in the tomb?

Whereas Peter and the Beloved Disciple only saw the burial clothes, Mary sees two angels, one at the foot and one at the head of where Jesus' body had been. Perhaps Mary is more spiritually perceptive than the other two.

The angels ask her: "Why are you weeping?" It suggests that Mary should not be grieving. In this way, the angels signal that Jesus' body is no longer in the tomb—she should not focus on the past—on either his death or his body."<sup>4</sup>

Mary's problem is that she is fixated on the tomb—fixed on the past—and strikingly it is only when she turns away from the tomb does she see Jesus. For John's Gospel, the tomb is history; it's a cave to be disregarded; only the living Jesus matters.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, we should not focus on empty tomb, but on the living Christ. We should train ourselves to focus on the positive not the negative, on the future not the past, on what is life-giving rather than what is life-draining. Why mull over-and-over again-and-again negative self-statements like, "I'm a miserable wretch; no one is as miserable as I am."

Those are death dealing statements. That's looking into the tomb and seeing no life. Rather, we should turn around and dwell on what is life-affirming ... like being thankful to God for all the people, opportunities, and blessings God has given us... focusing on the positive and future require letting go and trusting God..

#### 3. Turning to face Jesus

What happens next?

<sup>4</sup> Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 330.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Burge, *John*, 555.

Mary turns around. Jesus is there, but she does not recognize him (20:14). Jesus is right there, but Jesus is so different from what Mary expects, she cannot perceive Jesus. She sees, and yet she does not see.

Then, she makes a colossal error. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Ironically, she asks Jesus if he might have taken the body somewhere, when in fact he is the body standing there!

On the one hand, Mary may not have recognized Jesus because she is focused on the past. Her mind is on the tomb and the missing body.

On the other hand, she may not recognize Jesus, because of the nature of his resurrected body. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus until he broke bread with them. Later in John's Gospel, the disciples are afraid to ask who he is (21:12). So the failure to recognize Jesus is part of the resurrection traditions.

#### **4. "Rabbouni (my teacher)!"**

It is not until Jesus calls Mary by name that she recognizes him. She calls him *Rabbouni*, which means "my teacher." Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus taught that he was the Gate (or gatekeeper) of the sheep:

**Jn 10:3.** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 10:4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. (NRSV)

Mary recognizes Jesus. Mary is portrayed as the first to see the Risen Lord. However, even when Mary calls Jesus, *Rabbouni*, it doesn't seem to be enough. It suggests that she still thinks of Jesus in terms of her past relationship with him as her teacher.

But Jesus is no longer a human teacher. He is now one with God and beyond the manifest world of forms. He is beyond death.

#### **5. "Don't hold on to me!"**

Jesus tells her, "Don't hold on to me!" (20:17). The Greek phrase (*me mou haptou*) can be variously translated as "do not touch me," "stop touching me," or "do not cling to me."

Some have suggested that Jesus has a new resurrected body that cannot be touched prior to his ascension. However, that is contradicted by the next story in John's Gospel about Thomas, where Jesus instructs Thomas to touch him: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." (20:27).

The best way to understand the phrase is to see it as a mild rebuke. Jesus is telling Mary not to "hold on to" or "cling to" her previous relationship with him. That is, she is must let him go and stop clinging to him in any physical way. He is no longer the physical Jesus. It is a story of Jesus' transformation into a state of existence or a state of consciousness beyond death.

#### **6. "You have work to do"**

Right after Jesus says, "Don't hold onto me," he essentially says to Mary, "You have work to do."

That is, Jesus commissions Mary. He tells her, "Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17b).

Here we have an open-ended commission within the present world: "Jesus is risen, therefore you have work to do." This is very clear in all the Gospels; the women have an immediate task.

The resurrection of Jesus is not so much telling us that we have "life-after-death," but that the Risen Christ is here among us and we are to continue his work in this world. This becomes very clear at the end of the chapters:

**Jn 20:21** Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (NRSV)

## 7. Mary: "I have seen (*heōraka*) the Lord!"

The highpoint in Mary's *gradual processes of revelation* comes when she makes the confession: "I have seen the Lord!" (20:18).

The verb is *heōraka*—"I have seen"—is the same verb (*horaō*) used throughout John's Gospel for Jesus' own relationship with God.

**Jn 1:51** And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

**Jn 6:46** Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

**Jn 8:38** I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence;

And is it a phrase used for Jesus' followers who have seen the Risen Lord or who have come to believe that Jesus is Lord and Son of Man.

**Jn 9:37** Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 9:38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

**Jn 14:9** Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 14:10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

**Jn 20:18** 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.

## 8. Mary's Enlightenment

Notice Mary's progression of faith.

- From focusing on the dead past, an empty tomb,
- To an encounter with Christ without perceiving
- To recognizing the Risen Lord,
- To being commissioned to carry on Christ's work,
- To having the same relationship with God as Christ has with God.

#### **D. Reflection**

Easter or the Resurrection of Jesus is significant for two reasons:

First, the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continue to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death. They experience the power of the Spirit, the same presence they had known in Jesus during his lifetime.

Jesus is an experiential reality (see appendix). Christians through the centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past. As such, we must remember the empty tomb, but look beyond it to what God is doing in the world now.

Second, the meaning of Jesus' resurrection is more than an experienced reality. It means that Jesus is Lord. He is the Revealer of God. A lord is a master, one who leads and guides us to God; the one who reveals God. Because Jesus has become one with God, he is the Revealer of God.

Third, there are developmental stages that people move through in their relationship with God.