

Jesus Has Risen: The Presence of Christ Even in Times of Tragic Loss

John 20:1-18; Jerry Truex; April 24, 2011

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.

We often think that Easter is a time of cultural celebration, big smiles, Easter eggs, everyone his happy. But I want you to notice, based on the text we read this morning (Jn. 20:1-18), Easter is rooted in tragedy. Mary is confronting death and tragic loss. It is in the midst of death and tragic loss that Christ appears.

The text we read this morning can be divided into two main parts:

- Mary's report: "I don't see the body" (20:1-10)
- Mary's encounter: "I have seen the Lord" (20:11-18)

B. Mary's Report: "I don't see the body" (20:1-10)

¹Early 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. ²So 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."

³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

¹Τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ ἔρχεται πρῶτὴ σκοτίας ἔτι οὔσης εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον καὶ βλέπει τὸν λίθον ἠρμένον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου. ²τρέχει οὖν καὶ ἔρχεται πρὸς Σίμωνα Πέτρον καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἄλλον μαθητὴν ὃν ἐφίλει ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἦραν τὸν κύριον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου καὶ οὐκ οἶδαμεν ποῦ ἔθηκαν αὐτόν.

³Ἐξῆλθεν οὖν ὁ Πέτρος καὶ ὁ ἄλλος μαθητὴς καὶ ἦρχοντο εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον. ⁴ἔτρεχον δὲ οἱ δύο ὁμοῦ· καὶ ὁ ἄλλος μαθητὴς προέδραμεν τάχιον τοῦ Πέτρου καὶ ἦλθεν πρῶτος εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον, ⁵καὶ παρακύψας βλέπει κείμενα τὰ ὀθόνια, οὐ μέντοι εἰσῆλθεν.

⁶ἔρχεται οὖν καὶ Σίμων Πέτρος ἀκολουθῶν αὐτῷ καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον, καὶ θεωρεῖ τὰ ὀθόνια κείμενα, ⁷καὶ τὸ σουδάριον, ὃ ἦν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ, οὐ μετὰ τῶν ὀθονίων κείμενον ἀλλὰ χωρὶς ἐντετυλιγμένον εἰς ἓνα τόπον.

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. (NRSV)

⁸ τότε οὖν εἰσῆλθεν καὶ ὁ ἄλλος μαθητῆς ὁ ἐλθὼν πρῶτος εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν. ⁹ οὐδέπω γὰρ ᾔδεισαν τὴν γραφὴν ὅτι δεῖ αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆναι. ¹⁰ ἀπῆλθον οὖν πάλιν πρὸς αὐτοὺς οἱ μαθηταί.

1. Mary's initiative

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 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).

However, unlike many of the male disciples who deserted Jesus after he was arrested, Mary was courageous enough to stand by Jesus even when he was crucified (Jn 19:25). Undoubtedly, she was very grateful to Jesus and loved him.

Jesus was crucified on a Friday. When he died, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body, prepared it, and placed him in a tomb. Unable to visit on the Sabbath or Saturday (because it was the day of rest), Mary went to the tomb very early on Sunday morning.

2. What did Mary see?

We are told that Mary saw the stone had been *rolled away* from the tomb; literally, she saw "the stone having been lifted from the tomb" (τὸν λίθον ἠρμένον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου).

She was apparently terrified. So she ran to tell Peter. She may have thought:

- That the Romans had taken Jesus' body
- That tomb-robbers had broken in¹

When she sees the disciples, 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 other Gospels.

Peter and the "other disciple"—probably the "Beloved Disciple"²—immediately sprinted to the tomb.

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

² The disciple whom Jesus loved (ὁ μαθητῆς ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς); see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:17, 20.

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 they see the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head rolled up and put in a certain place. It's likely this is a cloth 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. Clearly, robbers had not removed the body.

Rather, we are left with the impression that what has happened stems from God's power. At this point in the story, the narrator tells us that "the other disciple" saw this and "he believed."

5. What did the Beloved Disciple believe?

Throughout the Gospel, the word, "believe" (*pisteuō*) indicates a complete faith in Jesus.³ The empty tomb becomes the last and the greatest signs that Jesus does throughout the Gospel that lead people to believe that Jesus is God's Agent or God's Messiah.⁴

³ I.e., the absolute use of *pisteuō* as in 5:44; 6:47.

⁴ 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).

The Beloved Disciple is an example of faith. The empty tomb is enough for him to trust that Jesus is Lord, the Messiah.

John 2:18-22. ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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

Next, we turn to Mary's encounter with Jesus.

C. Mary's Encounter: "I have seen the Lord" (20:11-18)

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

¹¹ Μαρία δὲ εἰστήκει πρὸς τῷ μνημείῳ ἔξω κλαίουσα. ὡς οὖν ἔκλαιεν, παρέκυψεν εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον ¹² καὶ θεωρεῖ δύο ἀγγέλους ἐν λευκοῖς καθεζομένους, ἓνα πρὸς τῇ κεφαλῇ καὶ ἓνα πρὸς τοῖς ποσίν, ὅπου ἔκειτο τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

¹³ καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῇ ἐκεῖνοι· γύναι, τί κλαίεις; λέγει αὐτοῖς ὅτι ἤραν τὸν κύριόν μου, καὶ οὐκ οἶδα ποῦ ἔθηκαν αὐτόν.

¹⁴ ταῦτα εἰπούσα ἐστράφη εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω καὶ θεωρεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐστῶτα καὶ οὐκ ᾔδει ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστίν. ¹⁵ λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς· γύναι, τί κλαίεις; τίνα ζητεῖς; ἐκεῖνη δοκοῦσα ὅτι ὁ κηπουρός ἐστίν λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, εἰ σὺ ἐβάστασας αὐτόν, εἰτέ μοι ποῦ ἔθηκας αὐτόν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸν ἀρῶ. ¹⁶ λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς· Μαριάμ. στραφείσα ἐκεῖνη λέγει αὐτῷ Ἑβραϊστί· ραββουνι (ὃ λέγεται διδάσκαλε). ¹⁷ λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς· μὴ μου ἄπτου, οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα· πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου καὶ εἰτέ αὐτοῖς· ἀναβαίνω

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. (NRSV)

πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν.¹⁸ ἔρχεται Μαριὰμ ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ ἀγγέλλουσα τοῖς μαθηταῖς ὅτι ἑώρακα τὸν κύριον, καὶ ταῦτα εἶπεν αὐτῇ.

1. Mary's enlightenment

In verse 10, we 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 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."⁵

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.⁶

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 open our eyes to what is life affirming. And that is what Mary does.

⁵ Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 330.

⁶ Gary Burge, *John*, 555.

3. Turning to face Jesus

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.

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 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:

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

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. 14:9-10. 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'? 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. 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, like Mary, people move through developmental stages in their relationship with Christ. We should be patient with people and ourselves in our search for and hoped for encounter with Christ.