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John 20:1-18
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“Who Are You Looking For?”

(Play TAPS)

I recently attended the funeral of a friend’s father who died very unexpectedly. I was particularly struck by how joyful people seemed to be despite their sudden loss. The funeral was indeed a celebration of this man’s life and the Christian legacy he left behind. The reception following seemed more like a party than a wake.

How is that even possible?

Easter makes that possible. Today we celebrate how Jesus conquered the grave. God’s greatest April Fools Joke ever! While Satan thought he had conquered Jesus on the cross, Jesus had the final laugh by rising again from the dead. And for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, we have that same hope for ourselves one day.

That is how a funeral changes into a celebration of life, and a wake into a joyful party.

Join me as we hear this amazing story from 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. **2** 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!”

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4** Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7** as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. **8** Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **9** (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) **10** Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb **12** and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 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.” **14** At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, “Woman, 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.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

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

17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 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.

“Early in the morning, the first day of the week, while it was still dark.” A new day, a new beginning, and God was busy creating something new in the world. Notice how the wording echos that of Genesis with the creation of the world. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty [just like the tomb], darknesses was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”¹

In the same way, early in the morning, on the first day of the week, the Spirit of God hovered over the tomb, while it was still dark, and brought Jesus back to life where there was once no life at all. And just as God breathed life into Adam, God breathed into Jesus’ empty body. There is no one else like him who has ever risen from the dead. Jesus is unique among all people, through all times.

This morning, I want to focus on three different people we encounter in this story, each of whom had different responses to the resurrection. First we’ll look at Mary Magdalene and learn how not to grieve. Then we’ll look at Peter and learn how not to respond to discipleship. And then we’ll look at John, known in the scriptures as the disciple who Jesus loved and see how he is the example for all Christians in the face of death. And finally we’ll consider the hope that Jesus gives us today.

First, there is Mary Magdalene. Mary was one of Jesus’ disciples from whom he had exercised seven demons. There also is speculation that Mary also had lived

¹ Genesis 1:1-2

a sinful life prior to meeting Jesus. Regardless, what we see in Mary was her utter devotedness to Jesus, her beloved rabbi. The Teacher.

John recounts how Mary was one of the last disciples to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Unlike most of the other disciples, she was not ashamed to be associated with Jesus when he was arrested, tried, and crucified. John tells us earlier in 19:25, “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple who Jesus loved,” namely John, himself.

Mary was extremely grateful for what Jesus did for her. Jesus had set her free from the spiritual bondage that had once bound her. And so she displayed her gratitude by what she did for Jesus in return.

We see in today’s story that Mary was also the first disciple to the tomb early in the morning following the sabbath. She and other women had come to prepare Jesus’ body for a proper burial. We get the sense just before this text that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus rushed to get Jesus off the cross because Jewish law prohibited dead bodies from remaining with the city walls of Jerusalem overnight. They were also rushed being that it was Friday and the Sabbath was coming soon and no work would have been allowed to have done. And so Joseph and Nicodemus quickly placed Jesus’ body in Joseph’s own tomb until the women disciples could return after the Sabbath to attend to Jesus’ body properly.

We see that Mary was extremely grief ridden that she just could not focus on the forest through the trees. Notice that not just once, but three times, Mary referred to Jesus’ missing body. She was looking for a dead Christ and was unable to find him.

The first time was when she first arrived at Jesus’ tomb, saw that the three thousand pound stone had been rolled away and that Jesus was missing. She completely missed this miracle that had taken place before her.

The second time occurred after she went and told the other disciples what she had seen. As she bent over to look into the tomb, she saw two angels dressed in white, seated where Jesus’ head and feet would have been. They asked her why she was crying. And she said, “They have taken my Lord away and I don’t know where they have put him.” Again she missed the miracle of the two angels because she was so focused on finding the physical evidence of Jesus’ dead body.

The third time happened when she encountered Jesus himself after the two angels. And Jesus asked her, “Why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?”

She responded, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.” Again, she missed the miracle of seeing Jesus alive right before her very eyes because she was too overcome with grief, focusing on her physical loss.

This is why I believe Mary is not an example of how we are to grieve. Because she was grieving like those without hope, as the Apostle Paul warned. She was looking for a dead Jesus, when really he was alive right before her very eyes.

Notice that it wasn't until Jesus called her by name, "Mary," did she snap out of her grief and see Jesus himself. She turned toward him, as anyone who lost a loved one would do hearing their name called, and tried to grab hold of him.

Have you ever had a dream about someone who had died and it seemed so real you that in your dream you felt that you could reach out and touch them? I've actually had a couple myself. But in those dreams when I turned to reach out and touch them, the dream immediately ended and I woke up. For those brief moments, it seemed like I had actually been in their real presence.

Jesus said to Mary, "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.'"

Jesus was telling Mary to let go of the way in which she once knew him, in the flesh and blood. If she wanted to follow Jesus from that point forward, she would need to embrace his presence through the gift of the Holy Spirit, not his physical being.

Notice also that for all her searching, it was not Mary Magdalene who happened to find Jesus, but Jesus who found her. Jesus came to her with a set of questions. Why are you crying? Who are looking for? Remember whenever Jesus asks a question, it is never because he doesn't know that answer to it. He asks to see if we know the answer to his question.

We have been focusing on the questions of Jesus these past couple months since Christmas. We've learned that Jesus asked some three hundred and seven questions, but only provided eight provided direct answers. So he was forty times more likely to ask a question than to answer one.

No surprise then that Jesus came to Mary with his questions even though, she was unable to answer them because of her grief.

She had physically lost Jesus, who she had known and loved and now came to her in a fresh new way. She didn't recognize him physically, but it was when he called her by name that she recognized Jesus' voice.

Are we feeling like we've lost Jesus this morning?

Are the old ways we used to connect to him are no longer working?

Do we feel like our spiritual lives have become drab and meager?

Be sure of this, Jesus is searching for us and he will not stop until he finds us.

The Gospel of Luke says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

Then we come to Peter, one of Jesus' first disciples and closest friends. Peter was the first to proclaim that Jesus was Christ, the Son of the living God, upon whom Jesus would build his Church.² Peter also said that he would follow Jesus anywhere he went, even to death. But then he denied knowing Jesus three times on the night of Jesus' arrest in the Garden.

Peter was the disciple who was full of spunk, but low on commitment. Always ready to make a big show of his devotedness to Jesus, but the last to follow through.

Notice that when Mary first shared the news that Jesus' grave was empty how Peter took off running with John, but was the last one to arrive. I love John's sense of humor here as he reminds Peter not just once but twice that he actually outran Peter to the empty tomb. Peter, petered out.

When he did arrive, Peter barged right into the tomb and saw for himself the strips of linen and the burial cloth that would have been around Jesus' head were all folded up, lying next to them. The Greek wording here implies that Jesus just evaporated into thin air through the grave clothes as they had been left exactly as they would have been wrapped around his body. In the same way when later that day as Jesus first appears to his disciples, when the doors were locked, Jesus just evaporated through the locked doors and stood among them.³

Peter just seems to disappear from the story at this point. All is said was that he still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to raise from the dead. Peter was clueless.

Do you ever feel like Peter? Big on the show, but low on the follow through as a disciple? We say that we want to follow Jesus, but then we struggle with staying consistent? I think everyone of us can relate to Peter at some point in our following Jesus.

And then there was John, noted throughout the gospel as the disciple who Jesus loved. Now let's be clear, it wasn't that Jesus played favorites and loved John more than the others. John seemed to really grasp how much Jesus loved him.

Notice that while John beat Peter to the tomb, he did not go inside until after Peter had. John was more thoughtful and observant than Peter.

The scripture tells us, John looked into the tomb, saw everything and believed. The Greek word for believed comes from *pisteo*. It means to have faith in, to fully commit to, or to put one's trust in something even though you may not have it all sorted out. Though John also didn't fully understand from the Scripture that Jesus

² Matthew 16:16

³ John 20:19

had to rise from the dead, somehow we get this sense that the pieces were starting to fall into place.

Which makes me believe that John is the perfect example of how we Christians should face death. On the one hand, we are saddened by our loss. But on the other hand, we know that our “Goodbyes” are really only “Goodbye for now.”

So there we have them. Three disciples, three different responses to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

One that was so overcome by grief and fixated on finding the physical Jesus that she totally missed his invitation to follow him spiritually.

Another who was so self absorbed that his discipleship was wishy-washy at best.

And finally another who, though he didn’t have all the facts sorted out, knew some how that he was loved by Jesus and believed that what he was seeing was true.

Who or what are we looking for this morning? I believe we all came searching for something.

Are we so overwhelmed with grief that we overlook Jesus who is all around us?

The Apostle Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”⁴

Are we wanting more from this life now?

Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and life to the full.”⁵

Do we want to know for sure that there is life after death?

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”⁶

Are we struggling to believe whether or not this story is true?

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”⁷

Are we needing forgiveness and restoration for our sin? Jesus forgave Peter for his betrayal and restored him as his disciple. And as he lay dying on the cross

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

⁵ John 10:10

⁶ John 11:25-26

⁷ Matthew 17:20-21

Jesus said of the people surrounding him, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”⁸

Are we needing to forgive others?

When Jesus was pressed how many times we should forgive someone, he said, “Seventy times seven.”⁹ In other words, “As often as I have forgiven you.”

Are we seeking God’s peace in our lives?

Jesus said, “Peace I leave you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”¹⁰

Do we need assurance that Jesus will stay with us come what may?

Jesus said, “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.”¹¹ “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”¹²

Whatever it is, Jesus is asking us to lay aside all of our concerns and by faith, even if we can’t fully put the pieces together quite yet, to believe that He is the Son of God who was dead and buried, but on this day rose again. And one day he is coming back to judge the living and the dead and to take those of us who believe in him into glory.

I’ll close with this story about Winston Churchill who was said to have been a follower of Jesus. “Churchill arranged his own funeral at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London with an impressive liturgy and stately hymns. When they said the benediction, a bugler high in the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral on one side played Taps, the universal signal that the day is over. We heard that at the beginning of my sermon. Then there was a long pause after which a bugler on the other side played Reveille, the military wake-up call.

It was Churchill’s way of communicating that, while we say “Good night” here, it’s “Good morning” up there.”¹³

My friends, I believe that God is giving us a wake up call this morning.

While we may feel like it’s “Good night.” Easter confirms that it’s really “Good morning.”

So who are you looking for this morning?

Jesus is alive, I tell you! He is here today!

He is risen!

He is risen indeed! Amen! (Play REVEILLE).

⁸ Luke 23:24

⁹ Matthew 18:22

¹⁰ John 14:27

¹¹ Hebrews 13:5

¹² Matthew 28:20

¹³ Robert Russell, “Resurrection Promises,” Preaching Today, Tape 151.