

Sermon for March 31, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, on this Resurrection of Our Lord Sunday. Amen.

Today is Easter Sunday! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our gospel for today is a very familiar one and one of the stories in the Bible that brings us great joy!

Now, it may not start out that way as we reflect upon the events of the past few days: Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples, His betrayal by Judas, His arrest, torture, and crucifixion on the cross. Especially the events from Good Friday, it doesn't sound like there's much joy to be found. But, as I've always said: you can't have an Easter without having a Good Friday.

And to one who may be celebrating Easter for the very first time and reading this particular gospel, they may wonder if there wasn't something sinister happening.

But we know there's more to the story!

“It was the custom in Palestine to visit the tomb of a loved one for three days after the body had been laid to rest. It was believed that, for three days, the spirit of the dead person hovered around the tomb; but then it departed because the body had become unrecognizable through decay.

Jesus' friends could not come to the tomb on the Sabbath because to make the journey then would have been to break the law. Sabbath is, of course, our Saturday, so it was on Sunday morning that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She came very early. It was still grey and dark when Mary came, because she could no longer stay away.

“When she arrived at the tomb she was amazed and shocked. Tombs in ancient times were not commonly closed by doors. In front of the opening was a groove in the ground; and in the groove ran a stone, circular like a cartwheel; and the stoned was wheeled into position to close the opening. Mary was astonished to find it removed.

Two things may have entered her mind. She may have thought that the Jews had taken away Jesus' body; that, not satisfied with killing Him on a cross, they were inflicting further indignities on Him. But there were ghoulish creatures who made it their business to rob tombs, and Mary may have thought that this had happened here.

*“It was a situation Mary felt that she could not face herself; so, she returned to the city to seek out Peter and John.”*³

In the gospel of John, John is described as “the one whom Jesus loved” though, obviously, Jesus loved all of His disciples. *Even Judas*. And even though Judas was the one to betray Him, Jesus still washed Judas’ feet. And, though the gospels differ on Judas’ participation, he was served by Jesus at the Last Supper.

Peter and John ran towards the tomb and John got there first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings but didn’t go in.

Then Simon Peter came and he went inside the tomb. John then followed and they both saw what was there – the linen wrappings – and what wasn’t there – Jesus’ body.

The scripture says the other disciple, John, “saw and believed”. He didn’t yet *believe* that Jesus was resurrected. He believed what Mary Magdalene had told him and Peter – that Jesus’ body wasn’t in the tomb. That the tomb was empty.

We know this because of what we hear in John 20:9: *“for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that He must rise from the dead.”*

“Then the disciples returned to their homes.” (John 20:10) Simon Peter and John went home.

They – went - home.

Our gospel for *next* Sunday picks up where our gospel for today leaves off, beginning with verse 19 saying, “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” It is hours later when we hear about the disciples again. But today’s gospel tells us that Simon Peter and John went home.

Did *they* wonder *what’s next*? Did they spend those hours between “Early on the first day of the week” in today’s gospel to “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week” trying to convince the other disciples *and each other* of what they had seen – or not seen - the empty tomb?

When I read the Easter story from the gospel of John, I’m always curious what those conversations must have been like. Who stole our Lord’s body? Where did they take Him? How can we get Him back?

Joseph of Arimathea had put – Jesus – body – in – the - tomb. No doubt about that. We know he was dead! The torture he underwent...well, no one could have survived that. And, one of the soldiers had even pierced his side.

So...where did they take my Lord? We are in danger, too, because we are His followers! Will we face that same fate?

Did they not think that there *must* be more to the story?

Mary stayed at the tomb. She wasn't ready to leave. She had absolutely no idea what happened to her Lord, but she wasn't leaving. She *couldn't* leave. She was heartbroken. Devastated. Her world, already shattered, got even worse. Her Lord's body was gone and she didn't know what had happened.

Mary bent down and looked inside the tomb. Simon Peter and John had told her His body was gone, but she had to see for herself.

Imagine Mary's surprise when she looked inside the tomb, *“and saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet”*? (John 20:12)

Why hadn't the disciples told her there were angels in the tomb? Or had they not seen them? How could they not have seen them? They were as plain as day to Mary.

The angels asked her why she was crying. She told them someone had taken away her Lord. She didn't know where they had taken Him. She then turned around and saw someone standing there. She didn't recognize who it was. The person asked her, *“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”* (John 20:15a)

She thought he was the gardener or someone who might know what happened to Jesus' body. *Where is He? Did you take Him? Please, just tell me!*

“Mary!” She knows that voice! She has heard that voice so many times before! She heard that voice cast seven demons from her body. She heard that voice preach and teach and laugh and share stories many, many times. And she heard that voice from the cross say, *“It is finished.”* (John 19:30b)

Mary saw His crucifixion! She witnessed His death! But she knew His voice! And here He was! Jesus was right in front of her!

“Teacher!” Mary exclaimed.

She wants to touch Him! To hug Him. Hold Him. To touch His arm. Hold His hand. Know that this is truly Him. She needs to know that this is not a dream. Not a hallucination. That Jesus is alive!

“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 God and your God.’”” (John 20:17)

Mary didn’t want to leave Jesus. She wanted to stay by His side a little longer. But she must do as He asked. She must tell the disciples what – who – she had seen.

“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.” (John 20:18)

Easter doesn’t end today! Well, maybe we won’t be fixing a ham dinner or some other scrumptious meal every Sunday. Maybe we won’t be eating chocolate bunnies or hunting for eggs every Sunday.

But, as Christians, we know that there was much more to the story! We know that there is much more to the story!

As I shared in the Presbyterian church’s newsletter for April, the dreariness and solemnity of Lent are over. Today we sing joyous hymns, there are beautiful flowers adorning our sanctuaries, and we celebrate Christ’s victory over death!

Oh, yes, folks, there *is* much more to the story! For now, we celebrate that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Sources:

¹www.sundaysandseasons.com

²Study Bible. The New Student Bible. New Revised Standard Version. Augsburg

³Barclay, The Rev. William. *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*. Revised Edition. ©1975 The Westminster Press. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.