

Sermon
Easter 2018
April 1, 2018
Based on John 20:1-18
We Have a New Family

It was early in the morning, still dark outside. The only people up that morning either have to be or they are up to no good. Or, if it's early in the morning, still dark outside, maybe you can't sleep. And that was Mary's situation. She was grieving the loss of Jesus in such a cruel and brutal way. It was like a part of her had died. And she didn't want to let go. She wasn't ready to move on with her life. All the disciples had fled, blended in with the crowd, returned to their homes. But not Mary Magdalene. Early in the morning, while it was still dark out, Mary was in the garden heading for the tomb where Jesus' body was laid to rest.

There are a number of traditions around Mary Magdalene, who we don't hear from again once we move outside of the gospels. One tradition is that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary. Another tradition was that Mary was Jesus' wife. Dan Brown the author made a big deal about that tradition in one of his novels, I think it was *The Da Vinci Code*. In the middle ages Mary Magdalene appeared in a lot of religious art, portrayed as a prostitute with long, flowing red hair.

Whoever Mary Magdalene was and whatever her relationship with Jesus, she was with him when he died on the cross. And she was there early that morning to be at the tomb where his body was supposed to be. Everyone grieves in their own way. For Mary, she needed to grieve by going to the tomb, to be physically near the body of Jesus. She just couldn't walk away.

How horrifying it must have been as she drew near to the tomb to discover that the stone had been rolled away. Who would have done such a terrible thing? To add insult to injury, the beaten and crucified body of Jesus had been taken by grave robbers. She needed to grieve by placing herself near the body of Jesus and now the body is gone and she does not know where it is. How will she grieve now? What a crushing blow this must have been.

So Mary runs in panic away from the tomb and toward Peter and the beloved disciple to tell them what happened. What were they doing out that early in the morning? Maybe they had agreed to meet Mary at the tomb that morning, to support her in her grief, but Mary had made it to the tomb first. At any rate, Mary doesn't know what else to do but run and tell Peter and the beloved disciple what had happened, that the stone had been rolled away, the tomb had been robbed.

Who is the beloved disciple? He appears a few times in the gospel of John, mostly at the end. He was there at the last supper sitting next to Jesus. He was there when Jesus was dying. Jesus looked down and saw the disciple he loved and his mother, and Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, behold, here is your son." And looking at the disciple Jesus said, "Here is your mother." And from that day the beloved disciple took Mary into his home. At the end of the gospel, the beloved disciple confesses to be the one who is the source of this gospel. So, we assume the beloved disciple goes by the name of John. It's just that the beloved disciple is never specifically named. He was clearly dear to Jesus. One might even say he was the ideal disciple.

Whoever the beloved disciple is, he and Peter ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Did they not believe Mary? I think they did. But they still needed to see for themselves. It is sort of like when you get bad news, you need to see it for yourself. Say, you are out of town and your neighbor calls to tell you your house burned to the ground. Well, you aren't going to hang up the phone and then call your insurance company and then a realtor to start the process of looking for a new house. No, you race back because you want to see for yourself. I think that's how it was here. Mary had given them some tough news that must have hit them like a ton of bricks. They weren't going to shrug their shoulders and go back home. No, they had to run, as best they could in the dark, to see the tomb for themselves.

The beloved disciple gets to the tomb first and he peaks in but does not enter the tomb. Why is that? Maybe because he recognized the tomb as a sacred place. It was a place of reverence. All he dared to do was to peek inside, where he saw the grave cloths lying there, but no body.

Why did the grave robbers take the time to unwrap the body? He wondered.

Peter, of course, barged right on in. That's how Peter always was. He opened his mouth before thinking, he had no problem pushing back against Jesus when he was uncomfortable, he didn't do "reserved". In he went, where he saw the grave cloths. But then he noticed that the shroud that covered Jesus' face was rolled up and set aside from the rest of the cloths. The time was taken, not only to unwrap the body, but to put the shroud in a separate place. Why would grave robbers do that? They didn't have time to go through all that hassle. In the cover of darkness they would have just pushed the stone back, grabbed the body and left.

The beloved disciple follows Peter in, now that Peter has gone ahead and broken the aura of this sacred site. He also notices how the grave cloths and the shroud have been placed just so. And, as the account goes, the beloved disciple sees and believes. Believes what? That Mary had told the truth? He believed Mary from the beginning. So what did he believe? He must have believed that Jesus had broken the power of death. He knew that this was not the work of grave robbers. Jesus had done this. He had conquered death. That's what the beloved disciple believed.

Then, as the story goes, Peter and the beloved disciple walk out of the tomb and go back to their homes. That's it? No huddling up with Mary and deciding what to do next? No, they just went back home, the beloved disciple believing Jesus conquered death and Peter apparently not knowing what to believe. At any rate, from their perspective there was nothing else to be done. The body was gone. That was that. No use hanging out in the garden any more. Might as well go back home, put on a pot of coffee and get ready for the day.

Imagine how distraught Mary Magdalene felt as she lingered at the tomb. Her mouth must have hung open as she watched Peter and the other disciple just walk away. No plans to start a search for the body. Nothing. She was there in the darkness of early morning truly feeling alone, lost in her grief and not knowing what to do. It's heartbreaking as the tears streamed down her face, her body wracked with sobs.

In her sorrow, Mary looks into the tomb again. Maybe she had hope that somehow the body might have reappeared. It couldn't just be gone, lost forever. She just didn't want to believe he was gone. So she looks in with her tear filled eyes.

Sure enough, something is in there. But it isn't the body of Jesus. Instead, she sees the soft light of two angels sitting on the bier, one at the foot and the other at the head. She must have caught her breath. What might the angels know? What message do they have for her? As it turns out, they have no message for her. Instead, they ask her what seems to be a ridiculous question. "Why are you weeping?" Mary must have been confused. Why would they ask me that? Do they know something?

Mary turns away from the tomb and is startled by a man standing right next to her. One minute Mary was all alone. Now she has two angels in the tomb and some man standing next to her. What's going on? This garden is all of a sudden getting pretty crowded. The man asks Mary some questions. "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Now, we know it's Jesus asking the questions, but Mary doesn't recognize him. Why is that? Why would she think it is Jesus? After all, he's dead. Maybe it's the gardener who has come out to see what is going on in the garden this early in the morning.

But why did Jesus call her woman and ask why she is weeping? Was Jesus being coy? I guess Jesus could have just been playing with her. But that seems kind of rude. Mary was in no mood to play around. Maybe Jesus honestly didn't know who it was. After all, it was still dark out. All he could do was make out the form of a woman and could hear her deep sobbing.

Whatever the reasons, Jesus hears her voice as she responds to his question. And he responds by calling her by her name. And from panic, to heartbreak, to unspeakable joy in a matter of minutes, Mary cries out, Rabbouni! It all made sense. His body had not been stolen. He was alive again and standing right in front of her! Her heart must have been in her throat. I wouldn't be surprised if she was starting to feel a little lightheaded. And I'm sure she instinctively reached to embrace him. He was not going out of her sight.

But then Jesus gives Mary a command. “Don’t hold on to me.” It’s not that Jesus doesn’t want to be touched. After all, next week Jesus will invite Thomas to touch his body, the nail holes in his hands, the hole in his side where the soldier had rammed a spear into him. No, Jesus was telling Mary that he can’t stay here. He has to go to another place. A place where Mary can’t go. At least, not yet.

Because Jesus then gives Mary the good news to pass along to the disciples. He doesn’t say, “Tell them I have risen.” No, his message is, “Tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father; to my God and your God.” What is the significance of this statement? Jesus will be ascending to his Father. That means he is going back home to where his father lives. But Jesus’ father is now also *her father*. That means Jesus is her brother. Her homeland is where Jesus is about to go. That means one day Mary will go home too, to be with her brother Jesus in the presence of their father and God for eternity. Wow. And with that, as the sun begins to crack above the horizon, and the new day begins, Mary runs to the disciples to tell them the news. The homes they have returned to is not their ultimate home. They now have a new home.

So what do we celebrate today? The resurrection, to be sure. But there is something more. Today we hear again the message that Jesus gave to Mary Magdalene. Jesus is risen but Jesus is also ascended. And that means something to us. This has established for us a relationship with God, Jesus, and with each other. Because of Jesus we all now belong to the family of God. Jesus’ Father and Mary’s Father is our Father too. Mary Magdalene is our sister and Jesus is our brother. And we are brothers and sisters to each other no matter what our relationships are in this mortal life. In the life to come that awaits us all we are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God. And since we are brothers and sisters with Jesus, that makes us co-heirs with Jesus. That means there is an inheritance that is being kept for us, another homeland that we will all one day walk on and live on together, when we transition from this mortal life into the next, a life that will never end. We will dwell together on our true homeland forever. This is what is promised to us. And so today we rejoice, even as we long for that day when we join

those who have gone before us, who are waiting for us, the great homecoming that awaits us all.