

“Resurrection is Just the Beginning”

Easter 2019

Based on John 20:1-18

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Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

The scripture passage this morning is full of movement. Early in the morning, Mary walked to the tomb where Jesus was. When she saw the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, she ran back to tell the disciples. Then Peter and John run to the tomb. They look and see and walk back to their homes. All this movement in the first few verses.

But then the movement stops. Peter and John walked home, but Mary stayed. She lingered at the tomb. Have you ever experienced a time where you find yourself just sitting, not able to leave? Perhaps it was after a game, and it was a season-ending defeat. Your team had been so close, but fell short. And as other fans shuffled out of their seats and out of the arena, you just sat there in numb silence. You weren't quite ready to leave. The news breaks of a terrorist attack, hundreds of people dead. You turn on the TV and see it on the news and they keep playing the same information over and over, but you stay glued to the set. You can't get off the couch and go about your day. You have to linger.

Mary was not ready to go home. She was not ready to go on about her day. She needed to stay awhile at the grave of her friend, her Lord, the grave that was empty, desecrated by grave robbers. She had to take another look. But this time she saw something she hadn't seen before. The tomb was not empty. There were two angels in there. One was sitting at the head, and the other at the foot, of the stone slab where Jesus once was.

Do you know there is another instance of a stone slab with two angels on either end in the Bible? In the ancient Jewish temple, in the Holy of Holies, there was a slab. And on that slab was the Ark of the Covenant. Inside that ark was the two tablets of the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God, a plate with manna, and a stick that always was budding called the rod of Aaron. And on either side of the ark there

was fashioned out of gold two angels, facing toward the ark, with their wings touching above the ark, bowing in reverence.

I wonder if Mary thought about that image, as she looked in on that slab where the two angels were sitting on each end. In this tomb, that once was the holy of holies, for God in the flesh had been there. But now, the ark of the covenant is gone. The presence of God has left this place.

And so Mary turns away. She turns her back on the tomb. Perhaps she is also turning her back on her religion. She saw those angels, she saw an image that brought to mind the symbols of her faith, of the Holy of Holies. But the memories, the symbols, didn't remove her pain, her despair, her sense of loss. All of her hope in God was dashed. Her religion, her faith, had failed her. So she turned her back on all of it as she continues to weep, filled with great sorrow and a broken heart.

But then she saw someone. It never occurred to her that it was Jesus. How could it be? Jesus was gone. His body spirited away. Filled with grief, she begged the gardener for information, to tell her where the body might be, if he saw anything.

And then the gardener called her by name, "Mary." And then she knew. Hope beyond hope! The one who fed the 5,000, who walked on water, who cast out demons and healed the blind and crippled, the one who called a man four days dead out of the tomb, had raised himself and was alive again! Imagine how quickly she went from deep despair, having given up on her faith, on her religion, on God, to suddenly being filled with joy and wonder, that even death can't hold God back. What indescribable joy. None of us can relate to how Mary felt at that moment, from despair to joy in a flash. And she bows down before him, grabbing at his feet to hold on to him. He has left her once, by God he is not going to leave her again. So she clings to Jesus. She is content to stay right there with him. No one is going anywhere.

But what does Jesus say? "Don't cling to me. Let me go." How hard that must have been to hear. She has him back and now he tells her to let him go? I suppose he had to tell her more than once, perhaps even reaching down to pry her hands off of him. Jesus can't stay outside the tomb. Instead, he says these amazing words: "I must ascend to my

Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Jesus has to go. He has to return to his Heavenly Father. He must ascend.

Let’s stay with this for a minute and reflect on what Jesus is saying to Mary. Jesus, the Son of God, descended from heaven on to the earth and took on human form. That is, God became human. The Creator became part of creation. The potter became a pot. And he suffered and died, like all of us. But then he rose from the dead and is alive again. That is why we are here today, celebrating the resurrection.

But Jesus rising from the dead is not the climax of the story. Even though we celebrate it with all of our songs and special music and flowers and all that we do on Easter, there is more to it than just Jesus rising from the dead. He does more. His resurrection is just the beginning. Jesus must ascend. And he ascends as a human being. He came down and became human, but he does not leave his human body here on earth. He ascends *bodily* to heaven. He remains fully human as he ascends back to his Father, to sit by His side. That’s the greatest news that sometimes we miss. In fact, this is what Jesus tells Mary to relate to the disciples. He doesn’t say, “Go back and tell them I am alive.” He says, “Go back and tell them that I am ascending.” That’s the good news that she is to relate.

And Jesus said he is ascending “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Jesus’ father is now Mary’s father. And if they share the same father, then Mary is now Jesus’ sister, and he is her big brother. Do you see what has changed? Where this is heading? Not only has Jesus defeated the power of death, but by returning to heaven as one of us, in some mysterious way a new humanity is coming forth, a new creation. In Jesus the divine and human gap is closed. One of our own is now in heaven with the Father. And one day, we too will join Jesus, our big brother, in the heavens with our Father, our God. For as Jesus ascends to heaven, so we will too one day. And on that day, we will be able to cling to Jesus, to embrace him and be embraced by him.

So on this day, we celebrate more than the resurrection and the defeat of death. We celebrate the beginning of new creation, of a new order, where all things are being made new. Our decay and death now leads for us to new life, new creation. Not only will we rise from the

dead, but we will also ascend and be with the Father and the Son through the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. This is our hope. This is our destiny. And as Mary ran back to tell the disciples, so we can share with others this great hope, that death leads to new life, that despair will be turned to joy, that weeping will be changed to laughter, and all of us, as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to each other, Jesus Christ being our elder brother, will be together in a new Eden, an eternal spring. For the power of God is doing this. Alleluia! Amen!