

Scripture Lesson: John 20:1-18*Pew Bible N.T. pg. 108*

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, 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. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet, they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? What 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Response to the Word

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

P: Thanks be to God!

John 20:1-18

03/31/2024 Easter Sunday

"John's Believing"

Pastor Amy Terhune

Saginaw First U.M.C.

This summer, beginning on the 26th of July, athletes from all around the world will gather in Paris, France for the 33rd Olympic games of the modern era. New sports making an entrance at this year's Olympic games include surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and breaking (which I grew up calling "break dancing", but that's neither here nor there.). I'm partial to gymnastics, myself, but I enjoy a variety of events. Of course, the oldest events there are the track and field events. Running races date back thousands of years to the original Olympics held in Greece long before the Roman Empire even existed. In the last decade or so, the record for the fastest hundred-yard dash was set by Usain Bolt, who ran 100 yards in 9.58 seconds. Just for reference. I can't carry a cup of tea from my kitchen counter to my recliner in 10 seconds, let alone, run the entire length of a football field. Which is why I'm not in the Olympics.

To my friends who are runners, you have my whole-hearted admiration. I will cheer you on from my folding lawn chair along the side of the route anytime. Recently, I saw a tee-shirt for sale. It says: “I wanted to go jogging but Proverbs 28:1 says that the wicked run when no one is chasing them, so that’s that. Which made me laugh, and also gave me yet another convenient excuse for why I don’t jog.

Now rest assured, all of this has a point. If we turn to our scripture lesson for today, I’m exhausted before we get to verse 5. Because they’re all running! Have you ever noticed that? Mary ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple. Peter and John set off running, but John outruns Peter and gets there first. Yet, he doesn’t go in. I don’t know why, for sure. Maybe he’s a little squeamish around tombs. Maybe he thinks two had better go in, just in case someone accuses them of something later. Maybe he’s just got to catch his breath. Who can say? But Peter’s not far behind him. And in typical fashion, Peter just goes right in, at which point, John follows. They see three things. First, there’s no body. Second, the linen wrappings that would have encased Jesus’ dead body are laying there, and third, the scarf that would have covered Jesus’ face is rolled up in another spot.

What Peter thought of all this, we don’t know. Scripture doesn’t tell us. He saw and he went home. If I had to guess, I’d say Peter’s not yet ready to take it all in. He knows in his heart that despite all his vows to the contrary, he denied knowing Jesus, not once, but three times. And then he flees with the others and goes into hiding. Peter is mired in guilt and remorse. He can’t see anything yet. The text tells us that Mary goes to the tomb while it’s still dark. I remain convinced that this isn’t just a report about the time of day – it’s an assessment of their spiritual condition, too. Peter’s still in the dark. He’ll come around. He will proclaim his Risen Lord thousands of times more than he ever denied him. But he’s not there yet.

But John... Now, John was there at the cross with the women. We know this because Jesus asks John from the cross to care for his mother, which John does. This leads many commentators to speculate that John was probably younger than the others – still an adolescent, perhaps, or someone who at least looked young enough for soldiers and members of the Sanhedrin to ignore. Which is certainly possible. I like to think Jesus included a teenager among his Disciples. But it could simply be that John had more courage than any of the rest of them, and that the disciples weren’t really in as much danger as they believed. We don’t know. What we do know is what scripture tells us: that John saw and believed. But if you’re wondering what that means, you’re not alone. Scholars love to argue this stuff. Does he believe Mary that the tomb is empty? I don’t think so. The Greek word used there for believe is *episteusen*, which Strong’s concordance defines as “the conviction and trust to which one is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of soul.” [<https://biblehub.com/greek/4100.htm>]. In other words, John’s believing is not merely an acknowledgement of what he sees, but an inward conviction of the soul.

Understand something, when Mary goes to the tomb in the dark that morning to find it empty, she almost certainly believes that Jesus’ body has been stolen – that some temple zealot or Roman loyalist or anti-Jesus activist has stolen the body and dumped it in ditch or left it in the desert for vultures to pick at. It’s the final insult for a man who died a criminal on a cross, guilty of blasphemy, killed for treason. There’s no act more vile and corrupt to a Jew than to disturb the resting place of the dead. No wonder she weeps so—even after he’s dead, they continue to mock and torture him.

But I’m guessing that John realizes something which may not have occurred yet to Mary. Namely, why would somebody stealing a corpse unwrap it first? He’s been dead three days. Even if someone wanted to make it easier for the crows and the vultures, wouldn’t you wait until you get where you’re going to dump him before you unwrap him? I mean, blah! Yuck! Right?

I think John sees those wrappings and he knows that death isn't here anymore. The wrappings fall away as bones are healed and wounds are sealed and skin rehydrates and synapses start firing and breath returns. If you're alive, wrapping don't stick. Have you ever tried to keep a bandage on without any tape? It might stick to blood and pus but not to healthy skin. Have you ever tried to keep a baby swaddled when he or she is awake? Doesn't work! Jesus got up and everything associated with death falls off. And John sees it. There are no angels, no earthquakes; just emptiness. He hasn't seen the Risen Christ. He may not yet fully grasp resurrection, but that empty tomb bears witness to the fact that Jesus has at least conquered death. John is the first to see what is—and to allow his expectations to be altered because of it.

But Mary doesn't see it—not at first. Mary stands weeping at the tomb. Weeping and feeling helpless and maybe indignant. Weeping so hard she doesn't recognize Christ for who he is until he says her name. I often wonder how he said it. Was it sharp and startling—meant to help her 'snap out of it'? Was it compassionate and so infused with love that it penetrated to the eyes of her heart? Was it the particular tone and inflection that Jesus had always used with her that clued her in? Maybe it was something of all of these things, who knows?

Whatever it was, Mary suddenly recognizes the Lord, and I can only assume that she then does what anyone would do when meeting someone they thought they'd never see again—she throws her arms around him. At least, that's my best guess because Jesus says, "Don't hold on to me." Other translations read, "Don't cling to me," which gives us a little clearer picture of Mary's reaction to discovering him alive.

And yet, isn't it a strange thing for Jesus to say? "Don't hold on to me?" Why would he say that? Well, maybe when Mary grabs Jesus, clings to him, celebrates his presence, maybe she thinks, "Now everything will be fine. Now everything is alright again. Now everything will be like it was before." And to that, Jesus says "no." The resurrection tells us unequivocally that everything will not be like it was before. Resurrection means newness. It means change. It means transformation. It means there's cause for hope.

In seminary, I met a classmate named Stan. He was further along in life than I was – early 50s, I'm guessing, and he was the nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. He was never too busy to listen, never too broke to buy you a cup of coffee, never too preoccupied to stop and pray with you, and never too competitive to hoard what he learned.

But he hadn't always been like that. In our preaching class, Stan shared his story. He had grown up in a broken home, one riddled by alcoholism, drugs, violence, and poverty. He learned how to hold his liquor from an early age. He learned how to use drugs, and eventually, how to sell them, too. He learned how to steal to support his habits, and those of his parents while he was at it. He learned and he learned well. So well, in fact, that he didn't even know how miserable he was. In his mid-thirties, he plowed into a tree one night, and miraculously, he walked away unscathed. He tried to get clean after that, but he relapsed. One night a year or two later, Stan got very inebriated. This time, he didn't hit a tree. He hit someone else. Once again, Stan walked away unscathed. But the man he hit never walked again—he was paralyzed from the neck down. Stan spent nearly seven years behind bars. If there was one day of his life he could take back, it would be that one, but Stan has never ceased to give thanks for the years he spent in prison because that's where he finally met Jesus.

Not long after that class, I met him and his new wife at a school potluck, and I mentioned to her how touched I had been by his story. "I know," she said, "It's really something."

"He's a totally different person than he used to be," I noted.

I will never forget as long as I live what she said in response to that observation. “Yes he is. His heart and soul had been shattered into so many fragmented pieces that when God finally sat down to put him back together, the result was that Stan was more Jesus glue than anything else.”

Jesus glue. Leonard Sweet points out that “when the soldiers taking Jesus’ body down from the cross, they stabbed him with a spear point, and “blood and water came out” (John 19:34). Today we know that rush of fluids reveals a burst aorta. Jesus died of a broken heart. The breaking of Jesus’ heart was what “finished” Jesus’ sacrifice. But a broken heart is not what finishes his mission. On Easter “It is finished” becomes “Now it begins.” [from “An Easter Heart” by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.] Which means that even broken hearts can beat again. And that is how I define hope. Broken hearts can beat again. Broken people can thrive again. Broken systems can work again.

Jesus glue. Death couldn’t stick to Jesus. But he sure sticks to us. Which is why Mary didn’t have to cling. And she got it. She let go and let God move. She ran back to announce, “I’ve seen the Lord!” I share her testimony. I’ve seen the Lord. I’ve seen the Lord turn around bad situations like Stan’s. I’ve seen the Lord bring healing out of terrible tragedy. I’ve seen the Lord take broken hearts and broken people and turn them into life-giving channels of the Spirit. Today we are reminded that death couldn’t stick to Jesus. And that gives me hope.

Mary saw the Lord, and the darkness vanished. John believed – he knew darkness was defeated. If you’re looking to see the Lord, to experience resurrection, to thrive beyond surviving, then you’ll need to bring your broken dreams, broken spirits, and broken hearts to Jesus for gluing.

Ultimately, the resurrection is not just about the truth and the reality that Christ is risen! Ultimately, it means broken hearts beat again. The world still scoffs at such hope. But in the end, the resurrection is about the truth and reality that we can rise, too—we can rise to the challenge, rise to the occasion, rise and shine, rise from the ashes, rise out of darkness. That is the power of God.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.