

The Empty Tomb: the Transforming Power of the Resurrection

Our New Testament reading this Easter Sunday is John 20:1-18, John's account of the resurrection. The passion and cross of Jesus were the climax and theme to which Jesus' life was leading. But without the Resurrection, the cross and death of Jesus would have been simply tragedy. What happened on Easter morning was the denouement of the drama of Jesus. As is true in a typical drama, the last scene shows the final outcome of the story as all the main characters appear on stage and the plot comes together. Our text focuses on the experiences of Mary Magdalene, John "the Beloved Disciple," and Simon Peter. Hear the word of God:

Early 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.² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one 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."³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and 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. ¹³ They 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."¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom 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."¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.'" ¹⁸ 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.

As much and as often as Jesus told his disciples he would be crucified and raised again, they simply didn't get it. Their understanding of a messiah was rooted in the Jewish expectation of a triumphant king who would overcome all other rulers, political and otherwise, and would immediately inaugurate his kingdom. There was no room for a crucified messiah in their thinking. They

believed there would be resurrection in the messianic kingdom, but not that the messiah would suffer and die and be singularly raised from the dead. What Jesus had taught them didn't click in their minds until after they'd seen for themselves evidence of the risen Jesus.

John Updike, captures the convictions of these disciples in his poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter":

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His Flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that — pierced — died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

Let's consider the evidence of the empty tomb and what took place in the lives of Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved Disciple, and Simon Peter. In the words of John Updike, let's walk through the door.

To the first followers of Jesus, his death meant the loss of hope. When their Lord was arrested and crucified, the disciples had mostly forsaken him and, in Peter's case, had denied him. They were bewildered, frightened, and their hopes were dashed by his death (Luke 24:21). They were so dejected and grief-stricken, they refused to believe the women who reported an empty tomb (Luke 24:22-23). The disciples were grieving over the death of their Lord..

Mary Magdalene was particularly grief-stricken over the death of Jesus. She, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, was deeply grateful for all he had done for her, and became one of the women who helped to support the disciples (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2-3). Now that her Lord was dead, and his body likely stolen, what was she to do? Jesus had forgiven her, but how could she know her guilt was removed if her Lord was dead? And then there's Simon Peter, the one who confessed Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). He had now denied his Lord three times, exactly as Jesus had predicted (John 18:15-27). His mind must have been swimming with

confused thoughts about his Master's claims as the great *I Am*, and now he's dead. John, who later wrote this fourth gospel, had paid particular attention to Jesus' claims, such as "He who has seen me has seen the Father," and "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 14:9, 11:25). What do these claims mean now that the great *I Am* is dead?

These disciples had pinned their hopes on Jesus. Now their Lord was dead and gone. The possibility of hope seemed the farthest thing from the minds of Mary, Peter, and John. Mary was so blinded by her tears she could not even see her Lord at first. Without the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, these disciples and all who claim Jesus as Lord are hopeless, embarrassed and pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).

But Mary Magdalene discovered the tomb was empty, and ran to tell Peter and John. Their fear was the grave had been robbed. John, the younger, outran the older and probably larger Simon Peter. John stopped at the entrance to the tomb, but Peter, ever impulsive and brazen, walked right in. There lay mysteriously empty grave clothes. The strips of linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body were lying as though the body of Jesus had been vaporized (Stott). Peter and John were bewildered by this evidence. Something supernatural had to have happened. The cloths were like the chrysalis left by a butterfly.

John simply looked into the tomb at the strips of linen but didn't go in. This was a look of initial surprise and consideration of the evidence. No doubt the idea that something amazing had taken place was in his mind. A lot of people will give the truth of the Gospel an initial look. They, like John, look from the outside. Like John's first glance, some never go beyond a superficial look. And without a thorough look, wrong conclusions are reached, such as Jesus' being merely a good man and teacher, but certainly not the risen Son of God and Savior of the world.

Simon Peter took a closer look at the evidence of the grave clothes. Again, these strips of living had simply been vacated and not unraveled. Some here today may be close to faith. The evidence and revelation of Christ and his gospel is in your mind. It's convincing and you have no reason or case for refuting it. But as yet grace has not moved into your heart. John went inside the tomb and "saw and believed." Grace was at work, and he accepted the evidence and within his heart he said "Yes!" to God. He knew Jesus was alive, and right then and there he trusted. It's interesting to note that "They still *did not understand from Scripture* that Jesus had to rise from the dead" (9, NIV). But they had enough evidence to believe Jesus was alive.

Mary had returned to the empty tomb and the angels asked her why she was crying. When she answered that the body of her Lord had been robbed, she turned and saw Jesus. But she didn't recognize him. Jesus' question, "Why are you crying?" was a gentle rebuke. After her remark to Jesus, whom she supposed to be the gardener, he spoke her name. She then turned to him, calling him, "Rabboni," and likely fell at his feet and grasped his ankles.

Mary's faith was awakened when she heard the voice of the Good Shepherd, who had said his sheep would hear and follow (John 10:27-28).

A classmate in my seminary Pastoral Care class, expressed his doubt about the historical resurrection of Jesus. Tom had been influenced by the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, the German scholar who set out to de-mythologize Scripture. According to Tom, the historical Resurrection was simply myth and not historic fact. I remember the reply of Professor Wayne Oates, who told this unbelieving student, "The Resurrection is something that has to happen to you." Of course, the Resurrection is a fact of history. We believe in a real Jesus who really died and bodily rose again. Yet, grace is God's initiative that reaches us, and awakens us by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

The Resurrection happened to Mary, Peter and John. Believers have looked in faith and have experienced the rescuing power of the risen Christ. The Resurrection changed the disciples from defeated adherents into zealous and courageous witnesses in the midst of danger and hostility and unto death by martyrdom. And to this very day, believers are facing persecution and martyrdom because of their indomitable faith in the risen Lord.

Mary had been gratefully devoted to Jesus, but when she saw the risen Lord, her sorrow over his death was turned to joy (John 16:20). Mary held onto Jesus as if to say, "I won't let you be taken from me again!" But Jesus told her about the new way of relating.

Before the cross, the disciples knew Jesus in a mortal way, and were taught, comforted and strengthened by his physical presence. And, as much as Jesus had told them, they simply did not comprehend the necessity of his death or the fact of his resurrection. But now that Jesus' atoning death was completed and he was alive in his resurrection body, there would be a transition in their relationship with him. Jesus was not saying to Mary that from now on they would relate less, but rather more. He'd promised the Holy Spirit (especially in John 14-16), who would soon indwell every one of his followers. Instead of being with them only when physically present, he would be in them and with them all the time. And they would continue to grow in intimacy with him in this transformed and transforming relationship.

Jesus told Mary Magdalene about this new way of relating to him because of his ascending to the Father. And then he gave her an assignment. Instead of her holding onto Jesus, she was now to take the Good News of Jesus to others. Mary was the first to be commissioned as a witness for the risen Lord Jesus. She was, first of all, a woman, and the testimony of a woman was not generally regarded as credible in that time and culture. Secondly, Mary was from Magdala, a notoriously wicked city. She had a reputation of having been possessed of seven demons prior to her being delivered by and following Jesus as her Lord (Luke 8:2). She was not a likely poster girl for a new religious movement, in other words. But that seems to be the way God works. Paul says God intentionally chooses the weak, foolish, and lowly in order to

demonstrate his grace and to show the power of the gospel doesn't reside in us but in God (1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Ephesians 1:19-20).

Robert W Dale (1829-95) was one of Great Britain's leading Congregational pastors and theologians who for much of his ministry failed to live and minister in the awareness and power of the Resurrection. He was brilliant, educated and polished, but lacking in power and fervor. One day as he was preparing an Easter sermon, "a realization of the risen Lord struck him with new power.

"'Christ is alive!' he said to himself. 'Alive—alive—alive!' He paused, and then said, 'Can that really be true? *Living* as really as I myself am?'

"He got up from his desk and began to walk about the study, repeating, 'Christ is living! Christ is living!'"

RW Dale "had known and believed this doctrine for years, but the reality of it overwhelmed him that day. From that time on, 'the living Christ' was the theme of his preaching, and he had his congregation sing an Easter hymn every Sunday morning. 'I want my people to get hold of the glorious fact that Christ is alive, and to rejoice over it; and Sunday, you know, is the day on which Christ left the dead'" (Wiersbe). The awareness of the risen Lord changes what preoccupies us and raises us to a new level of living and serving. Because Jesus lives, we also will live (John 14:19). Death has lost its sting. The grave has been robbed of its victory (1 Corinthians 15:54-58). The empty tomb is still before us as a place to meet the risen Lord.

Again, in the words of John Updike,
Let us not mock God with metaphor...
let us walk through the door.

He is risen!