

Resurrection and New Hope, Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Acts 10.34-43; Ps 118.1-2, 14-24; 1 Cor 15.19-26; John 20.1-18

Prayer

They say that hindsight is 20/20.

I suppose that the disciples should have figured it out earlier, but they didn't. They were not expecting this at all.

In this version of the Easter morning story, Mary Magdalene sees the stone rolled away and notices the empty tomb. Then she runs and tells Peter and John. (John is "the disciple that Jesus loved"—the author of this gospel.) They both run back to see the tomb for themselves. The details that they describe are specific: the linen wrappings used to prepare a body for burial but with the cloth for the head rolled up and placed elsewhere.

Nobody expected this. And yet, we are told that the disciple that Jesus loved "saw and believed." We don't know exactly what it was that he believed, though, because the very next sentence says that "they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." So, he *didn't* know that he needed to rise from the dead, but he believed. Something. And then they returned to their homes.

The story we usually focus on is Mary—and hers is a story worthy of our attention. She sees the risen Lord and she doesn't recognize him. Something about him has changed significantly so that it's not immediately apparent who he is. But something in the way he speaks to her reveals his identity to her. So, with some help, Mary is able to recognize him. I often wonder, just what is this resurrected body like? How can it be so similar on the one hand and yet so dissimilar on the other?

We also need to recognize the importance of the first witness to the resurrection—Mary Magdalene. By some estimations a woman of ill repute, but without any question, a woman. This is significant because as a woman her testimony was not considered valid. In a court of law, only a male could testify. And yet, Jesus chose to appear first to a woman—he revealed himself to someone who still needed the world to change before they could really hear what she had to say.

There is more to say about Mary's role—and much more *has* been said—but today I want to focus on Peter and John. After seeing this empty tomb, they *returned to their homes!* That is such a minor but such an important detail. This is similar to another story that we will hear in a couple of weeks from the same gospel—after Jesus' appearance to the disciples in his resurrected body, they had returned home and were once again fishing. They had gone back to what they knew. And while this may initially be surprising, I think if we try to understand what they were going through we might be able to sympathize with them a little better.

Try to imagine where your head might be at that day. Your beloved leader for whom you had dropped everything to follow around the countryside for the past few years had just been executed. *My* first thought would be one of fear. Were they coming for me next? How many people knew that I was in his group? Who was going to tip off the authorities? Was there a reward on my head? That first night (Friday) it would have been very difficult to sleep, even if I had been up all night with Jesus the night before, watching his trial from a distance. Beyond the fear of my own safety, there was also the realization that this movement I had been following so single-mindedly had collapsed, in an instant.

There had frequently been talk of who was closest to Jesus but never really any talk of who might take over. And despite the ability of many in the group to perform miracles and drive out demons, none of them were Jesus. *He* was the leader. The rest just followed him.

I would also be thinking “what have I done? What have I spent my life doing the last few years? What is next for me?”

There would be the overwhelming feeling that I had been dreaming all this time. The cold hard facts of reality would be sinking in. Here I had thought I had found something better—something beyond this world. Jesus spoke of something that made this world merely a stepping-off point for something better—and I had been a part of that other world for such a long time that his death brought all those dreams crashing back down to earth. Earth, where rulers ruled and violence prevailed and all of the ideas that Jesus talked about now seemed like fanciful wastes of time. This world isn’t going to change. Rather than spending time trying to make the world better I would be better off just taking care of myself.

But how do I do that now? How can I just go back to work again, after all this? After having spent so much time in this dream world?

How do you sleep when those are the thoughts ricocheting around inside your head? How do you even know what “normal” is anymore? How do you even know what is real and what was just made up—if Jesus and his whole movement died, what had all these people been focusing on?

But then, in the midst of this, Mary showed up. Mary, who everyone knew—many loved her, some resented how close she was to Jesus and some insisted on remembering where she had come from. But since she had joined, she hadn’t done anything to suggest that she wasn’t trustworthy. She was fully “one of them.”

And now she has this unbelievable story. Jesus’ body isn’t there. The stone has been rolled away.

Imagine the roller coaster of emotions. But, as John told us, they didn’t yet understand the scriptures, that he must be raised from the dead. They must have been desperate to see for themselves what she was talking about. We talk a lot about “doubting Thomas” (and we will again, next week), but Peter and John needed to see for themselves too. They rushed to the tomb to see for themselves if what Mary had told them was true. And then they got there and saw the discarded linens and the head wrapping, folded up and placed to the side. And John believed. Again, he believed *what?* That Jesus wasn’t there? That he hadn’t died? That his ministry of the past three years really had meant something? That it was not just a pipe-dream that ended with his death?

How did they go home? How did they deal with that? What must they have been thinking?

We all go through trials in our lives. Many of us have doubts about what we believe. Sometimes we watch what we’ve built or what we’ve been a part of crumble in front of us—sometimes just as quickly as Jesus’ ministry. We can be tempted to give up, re-evaluate, re-join the “rest of the world.”

But as we know now, this was not the end. Jesus' movement didn't stop with his death. It was transformed. The Jesus movement was resurrected—raised up again as though in a new body. A body that looked like the old body but wasn't quite the same. A new movement like the resurrected saviour that continued to know us and our shared history. And yet, this was not what we were expecting at all.

That Friday and Saturday night must have been incredibly difficult for the disciples—and even after seeing the empty tomb they still weren't able to put all the pieces together.

But we now know the one critical piece that they didn't yet understand. Jesus is risen! And that is what we celebrate today. That is *why* we celebrate *every* Sunday. Death has been overcome. The world Jesus was promising is *real*. And we can be a part of it. Our disappointments and inconveniences pale in comparison to this one truth: Death has been defeated. Death has been destroyed. Jesus was victorious over death and because of that, we too can share in the life everlasting.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!