

WHAT'S THE STORY?

April 5, 2015 – Easter Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: John 19:38 – 20:18

SCRIPTURE

John 19:38-20:18

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

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. 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.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 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.’” 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.

The Word of the Lord...

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

It can be terribly confusing when you try to compare the way the gospels describe what happened on that first Resurrection Morning. Each gospel writer tells a different story. Matthew is the only one who has sentries guarding the tomb. Then two women arrive and one angel suddenly appears, rolls back the stone and sits on it outside the tomb. Mark has three women coming and one angel sitting inside the tomb. Luke has an undisclosed number of women coming to tomb, two angels suddenly appearing, and then Peter comes to the tomb, apparently by himself. Then there is the account we read this morning from John with just one woman, Mary Magdalene, coming to the tomb. She runs back and gets Peter and another disciple. They come to the tomb with Mary following behind, but then the men leave. Mary sees two angels inside the tomb that seems to have been invisible to the two disciples. If you try to read together all four gospels' description of the resurrection, your head starts to swim with all the questions. Was it one, two, three or more women who came to the tomb? Was it one or two angels? Were these angels on the inside or outside of the tomb? Did they suddenly appear or were they there all along? Were there Roman guards? Did Peter show up or didn't he? What is going on? What is the real story here?

Now for some people such discrepancies are a problem. They feel like they have to come up with some sort of explanation and sequence of events to make it all fit together. As for me, I like it when the gospels don't seem to be in sync. It makes it all the more likely to be true. If Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were making all this stuff up, they would work very hard at being consistent with one another. They would check and counter check their stories to be sure that everything fit together. But, if as we believe, they were writing in different geographical areas over the span of around thirty years, talking to different people, it is only logical that there would be inconsistencies in their stories.

Now, there are certain elements that are common to all four gospels. All four insist that it was women; it was the sisters, not the brothers who were the first to show up at the tomb, and all four agree that Mary Magdalene was one of these women. All four say some sort of angelic being or beings were present giving the women the message. All four say that the heavy stone slab that covered the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. But it is John in our text for this morning that gives us some explicit details offering key insight into what was going on that first Easter morning.

Usually the reading from John on Easter Sunday begins with chapter 20, verse 1, with Mary coming to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark. We began a few verses before in chapter 19 where John describes the burial of Jesus. Now Jesus had been crucified, a form of execution normally used for rebellious slaves and the most despised criminals. Normally, victims of crucifixion were never buried, but left on their crosses for weeks until their bodies fell apart due to scavengers, exposure to the elements, and decomposition. Jesus died the death of a criminal, but he was buried as a rich man. Joseph of Arimathea, with the help of Nicodemus placed the body in a new tomb, and our text says with "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds."

That detail of a hundred pounds of spices is important because it helps to explain what Mary Magdalene thought when she arrived that morning. The first thing she notices is that the stone was removed from the tomb. So she runs and finds Peter and the other disciple and says, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." What does she think has happened? A hundred pounds of spices was worth quite a bit of money. She thinks there has been a robbery.

Grave robbery was quite a problem in the ancient Roman world. Archaeologists have found a piece of marble with an inscription, dating from around 40 AD, with an edict from the emperor stating that disturbing a sealed grave in any way is a crime punishable by death. That is why heavy stones were used to cover the entrances to tombs. It was partly to seal in the decomposing bodies and partly to keep robbers out. Mary's reaction was something of how you might feel if you came back home and found your front door wide open, the lock smashed in. You probably would not hang around but back off to a safe distance and call the police. Mary could not call the police because Jesus had been executed as a criminal. So she ran off and found Peter and the other disciple.

I will get back to who this other disciple might be in just a minute. In the meantime, the gospel writer gives us some other interesting details that are meant to tell us something. I am sure there is a lot more going on in these verses than we really understand, but some of it makes a lot of sense. The text tells us that when the disciples entered the tomb, they saw "the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself." When the unnamed disciple saw this it says that he believed.

Now, why would this pile of cloth inspire belief in this disciple? Well, they had arrived assuming that grave robbers had looted the tomb. If these robbers were working fast because they were worried about getting caught, they might have taken the body along with everything else to a safe place where they could make sure they had stripped away anything of value. But it says that the head cloth was not in a heap with the other wrappings. It was rolled up, and some translations use the word folded up, and placed with care in a spot all by itself. If grave robbers were in such a hurry that they took the body with them, they would not have neatly folded up the head cloth. This disciple realizes it was not grave robbers. So he believes something else must have happened. He believes something wonderful, something extraordinary has taken place.

The disciples leave and we now shift back to Mary Magdalene's story. When Mary enters the tomb it is not discarded grave clothes that she sees. It is two angelic beings. She is still so overcome with what she believes is a gross disgusting insult added to the most devastating injury that she doesn't understand who they are or what is going on. She does not even understand when the risen Christ is standing right in front of her. She doesn't understand until when? Until that moment when he speaks her name. Then all the pieces fall into place. Then she finally realizes what has happened. But Mary's reaction is different from the disciple. She returns to the others and preaches the first Easter sermon. It was only five words long, but nothing has been the same since then. Her sermon was simply this: "I have seen the Lord."

Now over the centuries scholars, theologians and preachers have pondered Mary's story and we cannot begin to pull out all the implications of what exactly is going on here. But the writer of John's gospel is deliberately setting up a contrast between these two stories. Over the last 2,000 years there has been a lot of speculation and controversy surrounding Mary Magdalene, but actually the Bible tells us very little about Mary Magdalene, other than Jesus cured her of some terrible suffering and she was at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb. After she preaches her little Easter sermon, she is never mentioned again in the Bible. There is no reference to her found in the book of Acts or in any of the epistles.

She is not someone with wealth, like Joseph of Arimathea. She is not someone with intellect and training like Nicodemus. She is not in the close intimate circle with Jesus like Peter. She is someone on the fringe, an outsider looking in, an outsider who manages to show up at the right place, at the right time. She is meant to be a contrast to the one who is called "the other disciple" and sometimes "the disciple who Jesus loved."

So the question might be asked, just who is this disciple? If there is mystery surrounding Mary Magdalene, there is more surrounding this disciple. The most common answer you will find is that John is this other disciple, the writer of this gospel. But if that is the case, the question then is why; why would John refer to himself in this way? A lot of answers have been given to that question, some better than others. This has led to a lot of theories being proposed that this disciple was Lazarus, or James the brother of Jesus, or possibly Thomas, or someone else. The theory I like best is that whoever the writer is referring to he wants us, the readers, to put ourselves in the place of this disciple. You are the disciple Jesus loved. I am the disciple Jesus loved. Each of us, as we read this gospel, we are to sit beside Jesus when he says "One of you will betray me." We are to stand with his mother at the foot of the cross and see his agony. We are to race with Peter to the empty tomb, see the grave clothes and to decide for ourselves whether or not we believe. The risen Christ may not speak our name, as he did Mary, but like her, we can make sure we are in the right place at the right time. Like her, we can believe. And like her, we can preach our own Easter sermon. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Perhaps the real reason why there are so many versions of the resurrection story is that each of us must make the story our own. Theologians have been writing and preaching for two thousand years why Jesus rising from the grave is true and why it is important and why it makes a difference. You can find all sorts of arguments as to why it has to have happened just the way the Bible says it did, even if we are a little fuzzy on the exact details. None of that really matters much until you tell the story your own way. Like the other disciple you can see certain evidence, but you need to decide whether or not you believe.

Let me tell close with a story about my oldest son, David. Years ago, when he was in junior high, he went through a time of questioning, wondering if there was a God and if there was anything to this Christian stuff. Of course, being the pastor's kid, he still had to go to church, Sunday School, and youth activities, but he was skeptical and unsure about it all. Now all our boys inherited their mother's musical talent (fortunately not mine), and it was about then that he started developing a fine singing voice. So we signed him up for vocal lessons. Naturally, as he started to work on various solos he was asked to sing in church from time to time.

One day he was preparing a piece that he was going to sing in church and his voice teacher stopped him. She said, "David, you can learn all the notes and hit them perfectly. You can master techniques to project and sing with strength and clarity. But you have to remember you are singing words, words that mean something. If you don't believe in what you are singing, your listeners will know it, and no amount of training can disguise that." Sometimes teachers are able to preach a more powerful sermon than any pastor can.

For some reason that really struck home with David and he began thinking about it. The words to his solo were this: "In my heart, I truly believe that you are the Christ, sent into this world to save us." It was a clear statement of faith and he realized he had to decide. Did he believe that Jesus was the Christ sent into this world to save us, or didn't he? If he did not, then he should not be singing that song.

David says that all of a sudden it was as if a light was switched on. He just knew that he believed. It was not a matter of accepting it because his parents' wanted him to. It was not some sort of logical conclusion he had come to intellectually. It was something personal, something spiritual, something that just happened. It was his song. It was his story.

That is what happened to the other disciple and that is what happened to Mary Magdalene. All of a sudden a light is switched on. In one particular moment they believe. It was a different experience for each, but from that moment on everything was different. It was not some sort of intellectual exercise. No one had convinced them that they did not have all the facts and provided them with new information. It was something they experienced. It was their own song, their own story.

The same is true for each of us on this Resurrection Morning. You may have heard the story many, many times. You come to church every Easter. You listen to the music. You pray the prayers. You sing the songs. But the question is: what is the story and is it your story? You see, all that goes on this morning, the choir anthems, the hymns, the liturgy, it is all rather like those folded grave clothes the disciple saw. You need to decide for yourself, do you believe? Because if deep within, you do not believe, then it is all a pile of a dirty laundry. But this may be the moment, when you finally realize this is indeed your story. You do believe. It is all very real, very important, it makes all the difference. Then you are like Mary. You hear your name being called, and you know. The whole world has been changed forever. For you have seen the Lord. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen!