

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

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.

Mary comes to the tomb looking for what the modern world would call "closure." She has unfinished business to attend to, namely she needs to finish burying her friend.

Jesus breathes his last on Friday at 3pm, leaving precious little time before sunset to tuck his body away in a tomb. According to Jewish law, burial on the Sabbath is forbidden, so they must be quick about dealing with their friend's body. Joseph of Arimathea offers his family's crypt, which is nearby, in a garden, where they can place the body.

There is no time to be careful on Friday afternoon, there is no time to mourn, there is just barely enough time to place him in that chilly cave, the sun setting as they heave the heavy stone door into place.

There is no time to anoint his body, not an extra minute in which they could properly bury their teacher. They are all business in those last few moments of daylight, hurried and efficient.

I imagine that as soon as the stone was placed over the tomb's opening, though, reality began to set in.

Whenever a funeral occurs, there is so much work to be done, so many details that need to be attended to, so many phone calls to make, so many thank you notes to write, there is so much work to be done that usually the friends and family are the last to grieve. As the writer Fred Craddock says, "Following a death, there is much to do and there is nothing to do."¹

But at some point, when the work slows down, when the house gets quiet, when people stop calling every five minutes, it starts to become clear that this is real. They are gone and they are not coming

¹ Craddock, Fred. "He is Not Here." *The Christian Century*. April 5, 2003.

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They say it takes an average of three years to process the death of a loved one, which sounds like a lot of time in a culture where you are usually given three days for bereavement then expected to resume living as if nothing at all has changed.

But the truth of it is that when someone precious is taken from you, your grief rarely follows a schedule. It surprises you in the grocery store one Tuesday afternoon in the cereal aisle, then it is quiet again until a Friday morning in the fall when you are stuck in traffic.

As soon as the work is done, there is nothing to stop it from showing up whenever it likes.

And for Mary, as soon as the sun goes down on Friday, as soon as the mad rush to get his body in the tomb is finished, the grief begins. She needs something to do, something to occupy her energy, but there is nothing she can do on the sabbath, so she waits and waits and waits.

Saturday may be the longest day of her life.

She has kept the television on, afraid of the silence that would come otherwise. Every once in awhile the phone rings and someone shares their condolences, but to be fair, they don't know what to say, they just know they should call. She knows they mean well.

She moves the furniture around in the living room for no reason, she empties the same trash can three times, forgetting each time she has already done it.

She has not eaten much, though the kitchen is filling rapidly with casseroles from the Sunday School class. Instead she uses the kitchen table to arrange and rearrange the burial spices she will need for his body.

That's why, having hardly slept on Saturday night, she wakes before dawn on Sunday morning, gathering up those spices on the way out the door.

She is looking for closure. She needs to finish burying her friend, so that she can start to heal.

She feels the loss of his life, but also the loss of her hope, the loss of all the expectations she had in him. She needs to wrap up loose ends, she needs to finish burying this body, so that she can start to bury all these memories. She is looking for closure.

She is in such a hurry that she does not think to call ahead and have someone remove the stone over the entrance. She has thought of every detail but this one.

But then, of course, when she gets there, the stone has been moved. There is the entrance to the tomb, wide open, but she sees none of the disciples, none of her friends, she sees no good explanation as to how this could be.

Without setting foot in the tomb, she knows that the worst has happened. Someone has stolen his body.

She runs weeping and hysterical to find Peter and John, to tell them what has happened, and they beat her back to the tomb, only to find the same empty cave. All that is left of him are the linens that had been so hurriedly wrapped around his body, lying on the floor of the tomb.

Mary catches up to them just as Peter is walking out of the tomb, his face confirming her greatest fear, there will be no closure today.

The scriptures do not tell us why the two disciples then left the tomb, leaving only Mary there. They do not tell us why she stayed after they left.

Perhaps it was another one of those times of grief in which the male half of the species feels an acute need to do something, even if there is nothing to be done.

For whatever reason, Mary finds herself the only one left at the tomb. Where else would she go? Where else *can* she go?

The burial spices that she has clung to all morning, the burial spices she realizes she held onto even while running to find the others, the burial spices that sat on her table all weekend promising closure, suddenly feel too heavy to carry, so she drops them to the ground.

After a long time, she musters up the courage to slowly stoop down and peer into the tomb, to see for herself.

But instead of finding it empty, she sees two figures there. “Woman, why are you weeping?” the angels ask her, as if a tomb is a strange place to weep. Not knowing whether it is her grief or her exhaustion making her hallucinate, she says back in a stunned voice, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

And then she senses someone behind her, and the same question rolls off his lips, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

This person is real, she tells herself, not like the two she saw in the tomb, and she assumes he must be the gardener for the property—“Look sir, if you are the man who has taken the body, just tell me where it is so that I can put it back where it belongs.” She might as well have said, “Let me have my closure, let me bury his body. Let me finish this.”

She is so wrapped up in her grief, so determined to find his lifeless body at all costs, that she cannot recognize that body when it stands in front of her, more alive than ever before.

Until he speaks her name.

The first human to know the resurrection, the first person to experience the depth of the good news of Jesus Christ, the first one to begin to fathom the radical love and mercy of God, this woman Mary, does so not as a result of a profound theological argument or a compelling piece of scripture or an Easter morning worship service in all its splendor.

The first one to know the resurrection knows it because she hears her name. Before her eyes can perceive what is happening, her ears let her in on the great secret.

This is not some resuscitated miracle, this is not some far off cosmic deity, this is a God who knows her name. Jesus doesn't have to say anything else to her, and she understands that the world has been turned upside down.

That the man she came to bury, the body she came to anoint for death, has not just returned to life, it has *become* life, risen with healing in its wings, as the old hymn sings. Today is no day for a funeral, today is no day for closure.

And as quickly as she knows what has happened, he sends her to tell what she has seen.

She is sent to the disciples, who have not seen, who will be asked to trust her vision in the garden until they can see it for themselves. Who will also be asked to trust their ears before their eyes.

She is sent out into a world that does not know what to do with death and knows even less about what to do with life, to proclaim that God is on the loose, that not even death can stop the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And this morning, a chilly spring day in southwestern Indiana, she has been sent to us.

To all of us who have heard this story a million times or more, who came here this morning with little expectation of new life or new understanding, to all of us who don't trust a thing we can't see under a microscope, who have covered over the awkward and life-shaking truth of Easter with bunnies and eggs and other non-offensive trivialities.

A weeping, grief-stricken woman looking for closure. A woman, fidgeting with burial spices in her hands, proclaiming that life wins.

Will you listen to her story? Will you give her just a moment where you believe her, where you take her at her ridiculous word, that God might just do such a thing? Will you even risk one moment to set aside your better judgment, to loosen your grip on the things of death, to take her at her word?

That this Jesus fellow, who called us to love neighbor, to put aside lifeless religiosity for the demands of life-giving faith, might just be who he said he was?

Will we be able to drop our burial spices to the ground? To drop our doubt, our well-educated liberal arts rationale, our stronger trust in things like death and endings, to see what God has done in the garden?

Are we willing to give up a world of our own making, in which we are fenced in by the limits of our own reason, to step into this garden where God is on the loose?

What if? What if Mary has been sent to us with the truth this morning?

Maybe it is too much to hear today. Maybe it will sneak up on you later, when you least expect it, in the cereal aisle or in the car.

Maybe it will sound like an angel chorus or a band of trumpets, or maybe it will just sound like your own plain name being spoken in love, being spoken by the one who knows you best, being spoken by a voice you never expected to hear.

Maybe even then you'll be able to talk yourself out of it. To explain it away.

I'll admit, I have nothing to show you this morning to confirm the rumor, no miracle to dazzle your eyes, and I share enough of your skeptical cynicism to know that this empty tomb proves nothing on its own.

But I pray there are at least a few of you this morning willing to be sent out into a broken world to live as if your life meant something, as if you were adored beyond all measure by the one who made you. To tell others what you've heard, what you believed for that one precious moment.

I hope there are at least a handful of you this morning who are desperate enough to drop your better judgment to the ground, and hear that voice. To hear your name.

Because today is not about closure.