

April 17, 2022
John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Unnatural Truth”

“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.”

My family observed Memorial Day (the USA’s version of Remembrance Day, observed on the last Monday in May) by visiting the cemeteries where family members were buried. We would begin at Hillside Cemetery in Plainfield, where my mother’s parents were buried. After raking the leaves and other debris that had gathered over the winter, we could place flowers on the grave and observe a moment of silence in remembrance of my mother’s parents and her stepmother who were laid to rest in that place. We then drove to Lake Nelson Cemetery in Piscataway, where many members of my father’s family are buried. It took some time for us to walk the length of the cemetery to visit the various gravesites, again placing flowers and observing a moment of silence at each grave. It took up a good part of the holiday, but it also seemed an appropriate way to observe a day set aside to remember those who we loved who have departed this life and rest in the loving presence of our Lord. Years later, I would return to Lake Nelson for the burials of my parents: my father in November 1999 and my mother in December 2008. After that, I would go alone to the cemetery to visit my parents’ graves along with the graves of the Laustsen family, the faithful departed who are gone from our sight. Visiting these graves was an occasion to remember and give thanks for their lives, but also a reminder that the life we shared together has ended, that they would no longer be present among us as they were in the years before their deaths.

All four Gospels report that on the Sunday following Jesus’ death, people visited the tomb where his body was laid to rest after his Crucifixion on Good Friday; in the Fourth Gospel, this happens *“early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark”* (John 20:1). While the other Gospels report that various women came to the tomb, in John it is Mary Magdalene who comes alone to the place where Jesus was laid. John does not report the reason why Mary comes to the tomb so early on that Sunday morning (in Luke, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the “other women” *“came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared”* – Luke 24:1); she may have come to see the tomb for herself, or to pay respects, or to grieve the death of the man she had followed and believed was the Messiah of God. What John does report is that when she came to the tomb Mary *“saw that the stone*

had been removed from the tomb.” Mary Magdalene interprets the removal of the stone from the tomb as evidence that someone has stolen Jesus’ body; so she runs to Simon Peter and the disciple “*whom Jesus loved*” (John) and says to them that “*they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*” (20:2). The two disciples immediately set out toward the tomb; they were running together, but the “beloved disciple” is the one who reaches the tomb first. In the Fourth Gospel, this disciple is never identified by name but always by his relationship to Jesus:

- “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.” – 19:26-27.

The role of the Beloved Disciple in John is to “*embody the love and intimacy with Jesus that is the goal of discipleship in John.*” (Gail O’Day). When he arrives at the tomb, “*he bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in*” (20:5). He sees that this was the place where Jesus’ body was laid on Friday, but no body is now present. When Simon Peter arrives, he enters the tomb and discovers “*the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, now lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself*” (20:7). The presence of the burial cloths refutes the speculation that Jesus’ body had been stolen, because grave robbers would not have unwrapped the corpse before stealing it. The Beloved Disciple then enters the tomb, “*and he saw and believed*” (20:8); his belief, however, was not that Christ had risen from the dead, “*for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead*” (20:9). Like the people who witnessed the miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11), the Beloved Disciple has “begun to believe” that God has somehow acted in this time and place. What the Beloved Disciple believes is the evidence of the empty tomb, but that emptiness bears witness that Jesus has conquered death and judged the ruler of this world (“*Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.*” – 12:31). The Beloved Disciple’s faith is as complete as evidence of the empty tomb can be. The disciples have not yet experienced Jesus’ resurrection, nor has Jesus ascended to the Father. Only after Jesus is glorified, when the Paraclete is given to the community, will the disciples understand and remember the Scripture (“*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*” – 14:26). It may be for this reason that the story reports that “*the disciples returned to their homes*” (20:10); Jesus has not yet appeared to give his post-resurrection commissions and instructions. Simon Peter and

the Beloved Disciple “*take in the sight – the utter emptiness of the tomb – and turn to go home, mired in confusion.*” (Katherine Willis Pershey).

While the two disciples return home, Mary remains, “*weeping outside the tomb*” (20:11). John is the only Gospel that reports that Mary “weeps” (*klaio*) at the empty tomb. It is as if she was paralyzed by her grief that is now compounded by the discovery of the empty tomb, which she still believes to be evidence that Jesus’ body has been stolen.

- “All she knows is that her Lord is dead and that someone has salted her wounds by robbing his grave. She stands vigil in front of the vacant tomb, her soul contracting in the presence of such cataclysmic absence.” – Pershey.

As Mary is weeping, she once again looks into the tomb, and this time “*she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and other at the feet*” (20:12). In the other Gospels, the angels serve as messengers who announce the resurrection of Jesus (“*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.*” – Luke 24:5), but in the Fourth Gospel the angels make no Easter announcement; they merely ask, “*woman, why are you weeping?*” (20:13), drawing new attention to Mary’s grief; all Mary can do is respond through her tears that “*they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*” Like the beloved in the Song of Solomon, who searches for her love, Mary Magdalene asks the angels “*have you seen him whom my soul loves?*” (Song of Solomon 3:3).

It is at this moment that the story takes a dramatic turn when Mary Magdalene “*turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus*” (20:14). This is not the only time when people do not recognize the risen Lord; on the road to Emmaus, the two travellers are joined by Jesus who “*came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him*” (Luke 24:15-16). It was only after they invited Jesus to stay with them and when he “*took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them [that] their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*” (24:30-31). John does not offer an explanation as to why Mary does not recognize Jesus; it may have been that her eyes were so filled with tears that she could not see anything clearly, or perhaps the idea that it might be Jesus was simply too far-fetched – after all, she was one of the women who witnessed his death, and the natural truth of life is that the dead do not come back. Mary Magdalene assumes the person speaking to her must be the gardener, because who else would be in the garden so early in the morning. So she pleads with the man to give her the only thing

she thinks is possible: *“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”* (20:15). If only Mary could recover Jesus’ body, she could replace it in the tomb and restore his dignity in having a respectable place to be buried. Having come to the tomb “in the dark,” she remains fixated on a past reality: *“She is convinced that Jesus remains dead because she has not wavered in her belief that his corpse has been stolen – even when she saw angels in the empty tomb!”* (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV).

But everything changes when the “gardener” does something surprising: he speaks Mary’s name. At first, she must have been stunned when this stranger knows her name, but when she turned around suddenly everything comes into focus and she recognizes that the man standing before her is Jesus. In a mixture of confusion and elation, she cries out to him in Hebrew, *“Rabbouni!”* which means “teacher,” a personal address or form of endearment of “rabbi,” the word Jesus’ closest followers used most frequently to address him. This interchange between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene reveals Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who knows his sheep by name, the one to whose voice the sheep respond:

- “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice ... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” – 10:2-4, 14, 27
- “But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” – Isaiah 43:1.

The promised transformation from weeping and pain to joy has been accomplished through the word and presence of Jesus (*“So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”* – 16:22).

- “The random gardener just starts talking to her, and at first he is unrecognizable. But then he speaks one word that reveals everything to Mary. One word is all it takes for her to believe and understand, to break into joyous worship: her very own name.” – Pershey.

Mary must have wanted to take hold of Jesus and never let him go, but the first command of the risen Jesus to one of his disciples is *“do not hold on to me, because*

*I have not yet ascended to the Father” (20:17). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ glorification consists of his death, resurrection, and ascension; it will not be complete until Jesus has “ascended to the Father.” Jesus then commissions Mary Magdalene to become the “apostle to the apostles”; he commands her to “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” The message of Jesus’ ascension is the completion of his glorification (“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” – 3:13), which will be a moment of great rejoicing (“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.” – 14:28). Because Jesus promised in his Farewell Discourse that “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (14:2-3), his ascension ensures the ultimate fulfillment of his promises to those he loves. “In returning to the Father, Jesus makes it possible for his disciples to share fully in his relationship with God.” (O’Day). Jesus now refers to his disciples as “brothers” (*adelphos*); they are now members of his family, as all who are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection incorporated as brothers and sisters of Christ in the Church, which is the family of all believers, the Body of Christ. “The risen Jesus has opened the way to eternal communion with God.” (Martin and Wright).*

- “It seems to me that she wished to enjoy His presence still, in the same way as before, and because of her joy at seeing Him, had no realization of His greatness, even though He had become much more excellent in bodily appearance. Thus, to lead her to abandon this notion and to refrain from addressing Him too familiarly ... He elevated her thoughts so that she would treat Him with a more reverential attitude.” – St. John Chrysostom.

Mary now fulfills her role as the “apostle to the apostles” by obeying Jesus’ command when she “went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.” (20:18). Mary Magdalene has progressed from being “in the dark,” fixated on the reality of Jesus’ death, to belief that Jesus has been raised. She is the first person to proclaim the Easter Gospel that “*Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*” Mary Magdalene is sent to proclaim this word to the apostles so that the apostles in turn might fulfill Jesus’ command to be “*my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). The mission of Mary Magdalene on the first Easter day is the mission of the Church and all Christians in the words: “*to bear witness to the reality*

of the risen Jesus and the transforming power of his love available to all who seek it.” (Martin and Wright).

- “Death destroyed. Hope restored. The resurrection confirms the good news that, when met by God in human form and called by name, the task of those who bear the image of God into the world is to bring this testimony to everyone. It is a familiar story. And the next generation deserves to hear it.”
– Joy J. Moore.

Our Memorial Day visits to the graves of our departed loved ones was a beloved tradition in my family, but it was also a day in which we knew there would be no surprises. We would visit the graves, do some maintenance, pay our respects, and move on. The natural truth was that when a person has died, we will not see them again in this life. But the Easter Gospel is the story of the unnatural truth of Christ’s resurrection, for *“those stones have been rolled away this happy morning, to reveal the highly unnatural truth”* (Barbara Brown Taylor). Mary Magdalene came to the tomb expecting to visit the place where Jesus was buried, but she left the tomb carrying the joyful message that death was not the end for Jesus, and death is not the end for all who are baptized into his death and resurrection. The unnatural truth of this day is the truth that turns sorrow into joy and death into life, for the message of Easter is that the end is not death – the end is life.

- “But the proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, nor ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen.” – Frederick Buechner.

The message of Mary Magdalene is the message we proclaim on this Easter morning and every day: the good news of Jesus’ resurrection is the unnatural truth that is the basis for our joy, because death was not the end for Jesus and will not be the end for us. Christ the Lord is risen; and because he lives, we shall live also. Death is not the end; the end is life! Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
Amen.