

John 20: 1-18

20 Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." 3 Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. 4 They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. 5 Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. 6 Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. 7 He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. 8 Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

11 Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. 12 She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. 13 The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." 14 As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

The Easter story begins long before the empty tomb. We know very little about Jesus' early years, though we suspect he may have had a moderate life of hard work. By the time he was twelve, we are told he is already getting some clarity about the power of God in his life. He must have been a child who asked many questions, because he knew who he was. Once he became a man, and was baptized by John, his ministry made the news. Though he went alone to the wilderness where he fasted and was tempted, somehow this story was told and repeated. This man was sure of what his mission was long before his ministry began. He wasn't going to let anyone or anything stop him from fulfilling it. Word got around very quickly and he had quite a following. His presence and his message were compelling, so much so that it was described by many with different emphases. Our scriptures only have four versions, but there are also other gospels, other descriptions that didn't make the cut when the books of the Bible were being determined.

He was a preacher and a teacher, a healer and a miracle worker. He spoke truth to power and was passionate about communicating his message of God's love and inclusion. He supped with the poor and the marginalized.. He healed the sick, touched the untouchable, lifted up the poor, and he advocated for the rights of those who were not confident enough or able to stand up for themselves. He seriously questioned the prevailing laws of the land and those who enforced it.

Because his story was told and retold by many, we are here today. Because Jesus was a powerful, memorable preacher and healer, a new faith eventually grew up, ultimately changing the way people saw God and each other.

As we've read in the Holy Week scriptures, it seems clear that Jesus knew what he was doing. The events were no accident. He was upset about the status quo and constantly put himself on the line with his message of God's inclusive love.

So, not surprisingly, the authorities were aware of his presence and his power to

influence the crowds.... with a mix of anger and fear. How dare he try to influence the people to look to a higher God..... wasn't the Roman emperor considered the son of God?

The parade entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the betrayal and capture, and the crucifixion - these all occurred in only a matter of days. Once they had their plan, the authorities didn't waste any time to rid themselves of this disruptive influence.

Imagine how the disciples must have felt. They loved Jesus, but we are told again and again in scripture that, like us, they didn't fully understand. They like others wanted a Messiah, and strong leader, who would change the world and liberate them from oppression.

They had human frailties and defects.... just like we do. They were fearful of the consequences of his actions. They didn't always fully believe.

That last week must have gone so quickly, shocking them with the speed at which he was arrested, condemned and crucified with such a horrible death.

Once he had died, and laid to rest, the grief of those left behind must have been great. The women who had supported his mission faithfully.... The disciples... other followers. Peter especially must have been overcome by grief, because he had betrayed him and disavowed even knowing him.

Overcome by grief, Mary Magdalene went alone to the grave, to pay her respects. To sit privately and mourn the loss of this powerful, and compassionate man. She found the tomb open, and Jesus' body was gone.

Here's where we modern folks are at a disadvantage. We don't have a mystical view of the world and events. We can accept much of this story up to this point. We have an understanding of Jesus life and death. But questions often

arise as we find it hard to imagine explanations for the disappearance of his body. We also have differing views of what may have happened.

In my own faith, for many years, these elements of this Easter story have been difficult for me. I'm a child of a scientist. And I have studied human development for years, our physiology, our biology, our psychology, or sociology and connections with others. We modern folks know that the earth rotates around the sun....the ancients believed the earth was flat and that there was a heavenly region above and a dark place below.

I don't know exactly when or how it happened. But in recent years, my understanding and acceptance shifted. Some writers like John Spong and Marcus Borg have helped me accept that this is one of those things I don't need to understand fully to be a Christian today. Serene Jones has said,

“Jesus comes to us not as a general idea or an imagined ghostly figure, but as a presence that reaches beyond our minds and our powers of knowing and touches our lives in ways we cannot see. They are felt - tasted, touches, smelled, heard, seen in image, and as such, often as unconscious as they are visceral. God is known in the muscle memory of our tissue, in the turn of lip in that garden smile, in the slang-tinged voice of a trusted friend, in the fall of the foot's arch in wet grass at sunrise. God's coming also unfolds in the world of our deepest emotions - a mark of God's presence that can sense that the world suddenly shifts into place and has meaning.... We liberal Christians [living in a questioning time need to make a leap of faith to imagine] a reality so utterly different [than one we can] explain.”

Something happened.... It is not essential that we understand exactly. The four gospel writers who were putting down their stories years after that day, they don't even agree, and each described it slightly differently. All we need to do is enter the story.... identify with those present....and listen as we are each called by

name. Like the intimacy of the washing of his disciples feet, we are known and loved. We trust the healing message of Jesus.... we trust him. He called Mary by name and he calls us as well, enfolding us into his larger circle of faith.

The proclamation of the resurrection begins with Mary's words, "I have seen the Lord!" She certainly experienced the surprise of a life time. When I stopped needing to explain what happened and became willing to accept resurrection, I was better able to see the new life all around that is at least partly possible because we **are** Easter People. We are **Jesus'** People.

Even with our doubts and our questions, we are called as we are Yes!! Something happened that day at the tomb that lead us here.... that lead us all to accept Jesus' special relationship with God. For nearly 2000 years, people have been reaching out to the resurrected Jesus. And because of this,

"The life of Jesus lives on in us. The Spirit of the resurrected Christ is entrusted to us for the sake of the whole world. He calls us each by name, to be his body, to join with all those who have gone before us, and the many millions who will come after us in the ongoing procession of his life in this world." (David Battrick)

As we celebrate the resurrection, we are immersed in a life of surprises. We say Yes! to wonder and to new possibilities. We commit ourselves to a life of grace as we do God's work in the world. My niece Jennifer posted this last night....

"Let us reflect on rebirth, renewal, miracles, and faith. The world really is an amazing place. And our happiness is deeply reflected in how we live and how we treat each other. So.... believe in kindness, believe in love, believe that good is much more prevalent than meanness in this world. We can make change... live in resurrection, simply by being the best version of ourselves." (Thank you, Jennifer)

Excerpts from Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front
by Wendell Berry, 1973

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
...Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

...Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
...put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts..

...Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Practice Resurrection..... and remember, "the mystery - the surprise - of
resurrection is not beyond us; it is within us, before us, around us, behind us,
above us, between us, a gift of Jesus to us." (Leonard Sweet)

He is risen! He is risen, indeed!!!