

## The Woman at the Cemetery

John 19:40-20:18

April 1, 2018 -- Resurrection of the Lord

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*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 towards 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.*

A few years ago, my wife, my young sons, and I had just finished dinner. It was a perfectly beautiful Texas spring evening, and we happened to be passing by the entrance to Greenwood Cemetery on White Settlement Road. To this day, I don't know what possessed me to do this, but I turned into the cemetery's main drive. I think maybe I wanted to show the boys the beautiful bronze horses at the entrance, but before I knew it, we were slowly driving through

the cemetery.

In my line of work, I spend a lot of time in cemeteries, and I happen to think that Greenwood Cemetery here in Fort Worth is particularly beautiful. It backs up to the Trinity River, and it's full of grand old trees that are more than a century old.

But just as I was taking in the beauty of the trees and appreciating the perfect stillness and beauty of the late spring evening, the questions started up from the backseat of the van. And they just kept coming.

Dad, what is this place?

It's a cemetery.

Like where you learned to be a pastor?

No, son, that's a seminary. A cemetery is where we bury people when they die.

You mean they bury people in the ground?

Yes.

Like their whole bodies?

Yes.

Even their heads?

Yes.

I don't want to be buried with my head underground.

What?

I don't want to be buried with my head underground. Can't they just leave it sticking out?

No, son, and it's not something you need to worry about for a long time.

And the conversation went on like this, and I was beginning to regret my decision to drive the family through the cemetery.

And just as we made the turn to head back toward the exit, we all became silent again. We passed by single car parked on the side of the road. And a few paces from the car, sitting on the grass in front of a headstone, was a solitary woman, about 50 or 60 years old, I would guess. And in her hand were a bunch of balloons, one of which clearly read, "Happy birthday." She did not look up as we slowly passed by, but we could all see her sitting on the grass next to the stone, and even though she appeared to be smiling and talking, there were tears running down her face.

Dad, what's she doing?

She's grieving, son. She's sad.

Then why does she have a happy birthday balloon?

When people die, sometimes the people who loved them come to the cemetery to think about and remember them. It's probably the birthday of whoever it is that died.

Our van was silent as we turned for home, leaving her alone once again in the cemetery in the fading evening light.

As many of you know, this winter and spring we've been working our way through the gospel according to John. When Matthew tells the story of Easter, he reports that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. In Mark's account, it's Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome who go. In Luke's gospel, he refers to them simply as "the women."

But in John's gospel, early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, it's Mary Magdalene who goes to the cemetery, and she goes alone.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene goes to the cemetery alone. She has no task to perform, no unfinished business to complete. I think Mary Magdalene goes to the cemetery by herself for the same reason that woman we saw at Greenwood Cemetery went by herself - simply to grieve and to remember someone whom she has loved and lost.

But so when Mary gets to the cemetery, her grief is turned to anguish when she discovers

that the tomb of Jesus has been disturbed and the stone has been rolled away.

It was bad enough that her rabbi and friend had been betrayed, arrested, tried, beaten, mocked, and executed. It was bad enough that he had hastily been buried. But now she has discovered an outrage. His final resting place has been disturbed.

And so Mary runs to get help. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple and reports what she has seen, and they come running and investigate for themselves. But when they look inside, they discover much to their surprise that the tomb is not, in fact, empty. The linen cloths that had wrapped Jesus' body are still there, and the cloth that was covering Jesus face and head has been neatly rolled up and put to the side. If someone came to snatch Jesus' body, it would have been a gruesome, smelly affair, because they took the time to unwrap him from his burial cloth. And if they were body snatchers, why on earth would they take the time to roll everything up so neatly?

And then Peter and the other disciple do a funny thing. They go to their homes. They just leave, and head for the house. And suddenly, poor Mary finds herself right back where she started - all alone there in the cemetery staring at the disturbed tomb of her friend and Rabbi.

And so she begins to cry. And I don't imagine that it was just a tear or two. I imagine it was great sobs of grief that began somewhere near her belly button and raised their way all the way up her chest and into her mouth and nose.

I imagine that she didn't make any effort to hide her tears. Why would she? She was all alone, and she had every reason to cry.

She had come to the cemetery to mourn, only to find an outrage, that the tomb had been disturbed. She had sought help from those who were in a position to know and help, but Peter and the other disciple had come, poked around a little, and then went home, leaving her all alone again.

And so she cried. And cried. And cried.

I imagine that one of her sobs so racked her body that she doubled over, and she just happened to glance into the tomb. And through her blurry, tear-filled eyes, she glimpsed two figures, dressed in white, one sitting where Jesus head would have been, and one where his feet would have been. And they asked her one of the dumbest questions in the whole bible.

Woman, why are you weeping?

I mean, come on. It's a dumb question. It's a cemetery, for crying out loud. It's a place where people cry and weep.

But Mary's grief was so acute that all she could say through her sobs was, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

And then she turns around, and there's Jesus standing there very much alive, but she doesn't know it's him yet. And he asks her the same silly question. "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Again, her grief is so acute that she supposes him to be the gardener, so she says, "Please sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

And then he calls her by name. Mary!

And in that instant, everything changes.

When he calls her by name, her tears turn from tears of crushing grief to tears of overwhelming joy.

When he calls her by name, she sees and believes.

When he calls her by name, she has everything she needs to go and announce to the others, "I have seen the Lord."

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Jesus stands in a cemetery and calls Mary by name, and the entire trajectory of human history changes.

But I wonder. What might have happened if Mary had decided to go to the house with Peter and the other disciple? What if Mary had decided that it was time to move on, and early in the morning on the first day of the week, had dried up her tears headed on into work? What if Mary had decided to pack it in when things got really hard?

Thanks be to God, we'll never know. Because Mary stayed, even when she was all alone, even when her friends abandoned her, even when she was wracked with waves of grief, Mary didn't run. And the first name that the resurrected Jesus called wasn't Simon Peter. It wasn't James or John's. There in the cemetery, the first name that the resurrected Jesus called was Mary's.

Cemeteries, by their very nature, are threshold places, places that mark a sharp dividing line between what was and what is to come. When we stand in a cemetery, we are deeply conscious of the threshold, the dividing between the living and the dead. When we stand in a cemetery, we are mindful that every life has a beginning, and every life will have an end, including our own.

John's gospel tells us that early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, three people raced to the cemetery, to the threshold. All three looked inside Jesus' tomb and saw for themselves that it was empty. Two returned to their homes, but Mary stayed there, at the threshold, at the border, at the boundary.

And what I want to suggest to you, friends, is that Mary, the one who has the courage to stay at there at the threshold, she was the one who was the model of Easter faith.

For Easter faith does not mean that you have it all figured out.

Easter faith does not mean that you have all the answers.

Nor does Easter faith mean that you just take it all in and shrug and head for the house.

Easter faith means being willing to stay in that place of confusion and doubt and pain, even when others have long since given up.

Easter faith means asking lots and lots of questions, even if they're the wrong questions.

And so my prayer for us on this Easter morning, friends, is that whatever thresholds whatever boundary markers we might be facing today, whatever life-defining moments might be ahead of us, that we will face them with the Easter faith of Mary Magdalene.

For it's in the threshold places like hospitals and cemeteries that we are most likely to encounter the risen Jesus for ourselves.

It's in the threshold places like courtrooms and prisons that we are most likely to encounter the risen Jesus for ourselves.

It's in the threshold places like the streets, among the poorest and most vulnerable in our community, that we are most likely to encounter the risen Jesus for ourselves.

For early in the morning, while it was still dark, the risen Jesus did not return to Pilate's headquarters, to the center of political power.

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, the risen Jesus did not return to the court of the high priest, the center of religious power.

No, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus went to the threshold place, the place at the edge of life, the place at the boundary. Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus, too, went to the cemetery.

And if we're willing to have Easter faith, if we're willing to stick it out at the threshold places of this life, even when others have packed it in, if we're willing to keep asking questions, maybe, just maybe, we, too, will hear Jesus call our name, and maybe, just maybe, we too, will be able to return from the edge of life to its center and announce with all boldness, "I have seen the Lord!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.