

He is Risen! — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: John 20:1–18

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Happy Easter! Jesus is Risen!

That first Easter Morning, however, Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and the other followers of Jesus did not know that Good News. They were still experiencing the deep emotions of grief and hopelessness.

We read in John, Chapter 20, verses 1–18,

20 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. ² 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.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must

rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.’” ¹⁸ 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.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

Every year, as we read these words from the Gospel of John, we can find ourselves represented in the three followers of Jesus. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John, referred here as “the one whom Jesus loved.”

Mary is the first to appear in the text.

It is still dark out when she goes to the tomb. We can feel her grief as she goes to mourn the loss of her Teacher. We can feel her confusion as she arrives and discovers the stone rolled away from the tomb and Jesus' body nowhere to be seen.

Mary draws an expected conclusion based on the evidence in front of her – that someone has stolen the body of Jesus. She goes to tell John and Peter what she has discovered.

The scene then shifts to these two disciples.

What appears to be a footrace to tomb ensues. “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.”

Why didn't he go in? The text doesn't tell us, and we can only speculate. But then Peter arrives shortly thereafter and does go into the tomb. Once Peter entered the tomb, John followed him in.

The reaction of John as opposed to Peter is also of note. Verses 8-10 tell us, ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.”

It is an odd set of phrasings from John in the Gospel narrative. John went in and saw and believed. Yet the passage notes that 'they' did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Peter does not seem to know what to think. Maybe he thinks, like Mary, that Jesus' body had been stolen. Whatever his thoughts, he returns home.

John, presented with the same set of information, sees and believes. We do not know what he believes. The text seems to make it clear that he does not know that Jesus had been resurrected and yet he maintains some form of belief in the situation. He too returns home.

We are not so unlike these two disciples. We hear news we do not always understand, and we run to see what has happened: to try to get more information.

We are presented with facts that do not make sense and we draw differing conclusions. We may remain confused, like Peter, and return home. We may hold out some hope, some sort of belief, like John. We too, however, go home. Perhaps this is our way of waiting to see what happens next.

The text then returns to Mary Magdalene.

She seems to have walked back to the tomb and arrives after the disciples have left. She is still grieving. She is grieving and crying over the death of the teacher she loved so dearly and now she is also grieving and crying over the loss of his physical body, believing grave-robbers to be involved.

Mary looks into the tomb. Unlike the disciples who had looked in and saw Jesus' grave clothes lying there, Mary sees two angels dressed in white.

Interestingly, this is one of the very few times in Scripture that a person is not told "Do not fear" when encountering a heavenly being. Perhaps Mary's grief was so overwhelming that such a greeting was not needed in that moment.

The angels ask her why she is crying. Her reply is "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She does not seem to believe that these two dressed in white had anything to do with that as she does not ask them any questions.

Instead, Mary turns away from the tomb and encounters the risen Christ – not realizing it but suspecting him to be a gardener. Jesus asks her the same question as the angels, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Mary replies, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." She still

believes that Jesus is dead, even though he stands just feet away from her.

I wonder how often I and perhaps you, have stood in the presence of God and been unaware. I wonder how often I and perhaps you have been so consumed by our grief, our emotions, or our jobs and our lives that we miss the opportunity to see God in action right in front of us?

Jesus then calls Mary by name; and Mary recognizes Jesus. This is reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in John, chapter 10, where Jesus says,

“I am the good shepherd,” who “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:11, 3). They follow him because they “know his voice” (10:4). Jesus needed to call Mary by name for her to recognize him.ⁱⁱ

Mary's very natural response is to reach out and hold on to Jesus. Jesus stops her and commissions her. She is to go back to the disciples and tell them

‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”¹⁸ 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 is the first one to believe in the risen Jesus. She is the first one to go and to tell others about the risen Jesus.

We can only imagine her excitement (and possible continuing confusion). She has witnessed an unbelievable miracle. Mary is obedient to the commands to go and tell.

I recall my excitement when I first believed in Jesus. I recall the excitement of children and teenagers at camps when they first believed in Jesus. Do you recall your excitement when you first believed in Jesus?

I recall as a teenager, feeling a call to ministry, not being able to wait to tell other – family and friends – of what I felt led to do – even though I did not have all the details and information about what that would eventually look like.

We do not need all of the information to be able to believe and to serve.

Some of us need to hear our name called to believe. Some of us believe, but are cautious. And some of us are not sure what we have experienced until sometime later. Some of us believe and share the good news of the risen Christ immediately and others of us are not so sure, and therefore wait.

All of us gathered here on this Easter Sunday ARE in this story. At various times in our lives, we may be any one of the characters in this passage.

Regardless of where we may find ourselves in this story this morning, we are part of the story. We are commissioned to believe and to share the Good News of the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I invite you to claim the truth of Easter, by proclaiming with me again, the words from our Call to Worship.

Beloved church, behold the victory of our God: Jesus, our Lord, has conquered the grave.

*Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!***

Sin and death shall reign no more.

*Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!***

Let this place resound with joy.

Christ is risen! Alleluia! Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 167). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.