

Sermon – April 4, 2021
“But go to my brothers and say”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 20:1-18

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

There is a part of me that just wants to keep hearing those words. I want to simply stand here and hear us declare together that Jesus has been raised from the dead. What a joy it is for us to be able to be together again on an Easter Sunday morning and to hear those words of faith. It has been almost two years since we have shared that call and response as a church, as the gathered body of Christ. Last Easter we had been restricted from meeting together, and perhaps we spoke that greeting in our homes in response to a live stream video we watched. We have been quieted by the necessity of a pandemic, but this morning we are able again to testify to the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark the day after the Sabbath. She has come before the rising of the sun, bringing spices and ointments to complete the burial of Jesus' body. She has come to do for him what she can and to grieve his death through care for his body. She comes as early as she dares and she comes knowing that she cannot roll away the stone that blocks her access to the tomb, but she comes with faith that she will find a way to have it moved. She comes to serve her Lord.

The moon is just past full so even though she comes while it is dark, there is light for her to see to walk. It will be dark in the tomb but she will be ready to work when the light of a new day comes. As she walks into the garden where the tomb is that holds Jesus' body, Mary can make out the tomb in the moonlight. When she sees the tomb, she realizes that the stone is rolled back. The tomb is open! Mary is filled with fear and anxiety about what an open tomb means. The scripture does not confirm for us that Mary looked into the tomb at this point, as the darkness would have prevented her from seeing inside. She does not need to see; she grasps what

an open tomb means. We will hear her repeat words that reflect her understanding three times in some form. Her fear is that, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and I do not know where they have laid him.” The “they” in her fear is most likely the Jewish authorities. Mary runs to tell Peter and John this terrible news and when she finds them, she tells them what she has found.

Peter and John start to the tomb from the separate places where they are staying when Mary finds them and shares her news, her fears about the tomb and Jesus’ body. The two followers of Jesus both run to the garden to see if what she has shared with them is true. They start from different places, meet along the way, and run together for a while, then John leaves Peter behind, and arrives first at the tomb. John stoops down and sees the linen wrappings lying inside, but there is no body to be seen. John does not go into the tomb.

Then Peter arrives and goes into the tomb. Peter’s description of what he sees confirms that there is not a body in the tomb. Only the linen cloths that were once wrapped around Jesus’ lifeless body remain in the place where he was laid. There is no sign of disorder, as if someone had come into the tomb and quickly removed the body. There are just the grave cloths lying where they would have been on Jesus’ body. Peter’s description of the empty tomb confirms for us that Jesus’ body is gone. And then John enters the tomb, sees the empty tomb, and believes. John may not yet understand the depths of the mystery of a resurrected Jesus, but the empty tomb is the beginning of belief for him. John is an example of one who believes without seeing a resurrected Jesus. These two men then leave behind the empty tomb and return to their homes. They do not comfort Mary. Their presence at the tomb provides two Jewish men as witnesses to an empty tomb. In the Jewish culture, their witness would be accepted as legal testimony, as legal verification that the tomb was empty. For believers, their testimony becomes the testimony of two apostles to an empty tomb. For believers, this is a more powerful statement. It gives us assurance that they found an empty tomb. Their trip to the tomb becomes for us a steadfast witness that on Easter morning the tomb was empty, Jesus’ body was not to be found. It is the beginning of something new; it is the beginning of resurrected life.

Mary stays at the tomb to weep. She is mourning Jesus’ death and now also his missing body. John’s new growing belief has not been shared with her; instead, she is alone with her grief, fears, and sorrow. Mary looks into the tomb to verify what she already knows. When she does, she sees two angels. Mary is not overcome with fear at seeing the angels. Perhaps she is too stricken with grief, or maybe her past life experience has prepared her for such an encounter.

The angels do not tell her to not be afraid; instead, they ask her a question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” This question is more of a statement that weeping is not the correct response for what she is experiencing than it is seeking information. The presence of angels should speak to Mary of some new message for her from God. Instead, Mary takes their presence as hope that she can now find Jesus’ missing body. Perhaps they will tell her where it has been laid. For the second time, she makes her statement that sums up her fears and focus this morning, telling the angels, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” The angel’s question is pointing Mary to joy and not sadness, but she is not yet able to understand what has happened.

Mary then turns to engage someone behind her. She rises up from stooping over to look into the tomb and from talking with angels to see a man she takes to be the one who keeps the garden around the tomb. She does not recognize Jesus, but thinks he is the gardener. Jesus asks her two questions, “Woman, why are you crying?” and “Whom are you looking for?” So focused is Mary on her sorrow and her desire to find Jesus’ body that she cannot see who this is speaking to her, and for the third time she replies, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Mary will not be dislodged from her task, her desire to find Jesus’ body. Her thoughts seem to be, “Maybe this gardener knows where the body can be found.” Then Jesus speaks her name. “Mary!” Sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd when he calls them by name. With her name coming from this man with a familiar voice, Mary recognizes who this is and replies, “Rabbouni!” And in that instant, she is no longer seeking to find a dead body, but to resume the relationship with Jesus that she has known since he healed her. She is seeking a return to normal, to what once was, a return to that which was taken away by death, but has somehow been made possible again. Mary does not yet understand what it means for there to be an empty tomb and to have Jesus standing before her. Her desire is to again have a “normal” relationship with him. Her desire is to hold on to him, to follow him and to provide for him again as she once had done. Her response to her recognition of who this is talking to her is to desire to continue the relationship she once had with this teacher. But Jesus is calling her to a new relationship, a relationship with a resurrected Jesus. In most of our Bible translations, Jesus calls her Mary, but what he actually speaks is a Hebrew name. It is the Hebrew name for Mary or Miriam. If we know that Jesus uses the Hebrew name here when he calls Mary, it brings to this moment more than just the recognition by a sheep of its master’s

voice. It brings to our minds the time when Moses' sister Miriam watched over an ark covered with pitch on the Nile River, and when it was opened, she became a messenger to Pharaoh's daughter and to Moses' mother that Moses was alive and that now his mother was to be paid to care for him as a child of Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam was a prophet, one who speaks for God, and was used to tell people about the first Moses. Jesus' use of that Hebrew name points to a different role for Mary. His call is for her to be a prophet for him to his people. It is a call to tell others about the arrival of a new Moses. Jesus' use of Miriam speaks to not the continuation of the physical following of Jesus, but instead speaks to a new spiritual relationship with him. It speaks to a new relationship for Mary with a resurrected Jesus. She is not to hold on to what has passed but to go forward with him into what is coming, into what has begun with his resurrection. Notice what Jesus tells Mary, "But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Jesus speaks to a new relationship, one more intimate than what his followers have known, a relationship where his followers are now his brothers and sisters, children of God. Jesus speaks to a relationship where Jesus' Father is their Father, and Jesus' God is their God. This idea is what has been made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. It is an invitation into abundant life. It is an invitation into the relationship that Jesus has with God the Father. Instead of holding on to Jesus, Mary is sent by Jesus to tell this good news, and Mary obeys, leaves Jesus, and goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." And then she shares with them the Good News she was given by Jesus.

Peter and John are witnesses to an empty tomb, and John believes based on seeing the empty tomb, yet they go to their homes with what they have seen. Mary is the first to witness the resurrected Lord and to carry the message that she has seen the Lord to others. The message she carries is that she has seen the Lord, believes Jesus is alive, and that he is now welcoming those who believe in him into a new relationship with his God and Father as children of the living God. John has only seen the empty tomb and believed. He is one who believes without seeing, one who is blessed because he believed without sight. Mary has seen the resurrected Jesus and has gone to share the Good News with those to whom she was sent.

The resurrection is a mystery that we probe with the help of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth. It is a mystery that is accepted by faith. It is a message that was given to us by witnesses to an empty tomb and a risen Lord. It is a message that Jesus is alive and is the Son of

God, the first born of the dead. We who come to believe are invited into this same relationship, the relationship Jesus has with the Father. And like Mary, or Miriam, we are to be those who take this good news and share it with others, those to whom we are sent by Jesus. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Don't just hold the joy that comes with that news in our hearts. Be like Mary, go forth and share the good news with those to whom we are sent.

Pray with me: Father, we thank you for the witnesses to an empty tomb and a risen Lord. Lord, we also are those you have invited into a new relationship with your God and your Father. Lord, we desire to be children of God, your sisters and brothers. Help us to hear this good news and to go and share it with those you send us to. Amen