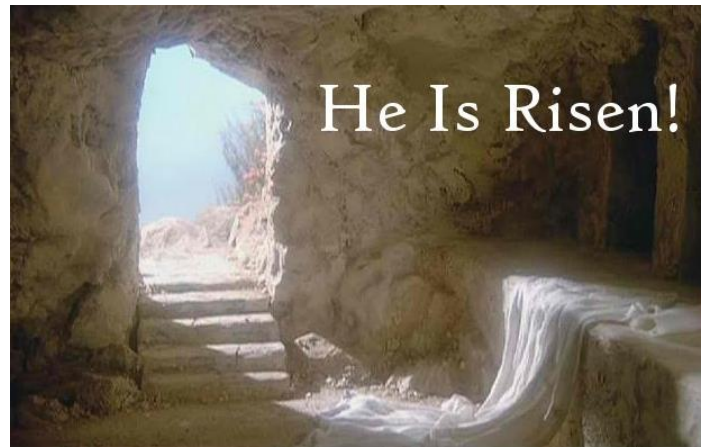


Sermon – March 31, 2024
“My Father and Your Father, My God and Your God”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 20:1-18

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Some of us gathered this morning before the sunrise to experience some of what it must have been like for Mary Magdalene on that first day of the week so many years ago when she went to the tomb where they had laid Jesus' lifeless body late on Friday the week before. We gathered together early this morning because early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb to weep and to be close to Jesus whom she loved. When she arrives in the pre-dawn time, while it is still dark, she discovers the stone rolled back from the tomb and she concludes that the tomb is empty and Jesus' body has been moved or stolen, and she has no idea where whoever took his body has put it. In response to her discovery, Mary leaves the tomb and runs to get help, to share the news that the tomb is empty. She leaves without looking into the tomb, as in the pre-dawn time of her visit there is no light in the tomb. She carries a message that will ring across the ages: the tomb is empty and we do not know where they have laid him. Her discovery early on Easter morning is the first indication that something might have gone wrong with Satan's plan to kill God's Son and end the coming kingdom of God on earth. Her message is hard for the disciples to accept, and in response, Peter and John run to the tomb to verify her news. Two Jewish men go to the tomb to see if Mary's news is true. They go looking for a dead body just as Mary has been looking for a dead body since she found the open tomb.

We know the details. Peter and John are running together, and Peter is in the lead, but John soon outruns Peter and arrives at the tomb and looks in and sees the linen wrappings but does not enter. John looks in and sees the empty tomb. Peter arrives and goes right on into the tomb and sees all of the cloths that had been on Jesus' body lying in the tomb as if Jesus' body has passed through them. At this point, John enters the tomb as well and he sees and believes.

Peter and John have both had experience with someone being brought back to life from the dead. They were present when Lazarus came out of the tomb wrapped in his burial cloths. Something different has happened here as there is no body to be found wrapped up in burial cloths waiting to be released. Instead, there are only the cloths lying where the body of Jesus was placed on Friday. Grave robbers would not have taken a body and left the cloths. The cloths were worth too much money for a robber to leave behind. When John comes in and sees the cloths and the empty tomb, he believes. John becomes the first person recorded in the Gospels to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. Others will also come to belief, many others in time, but John's love for Jesus helps him to see what has happened and to believe. Later, John also will be the first to recognize the risen Jesus on the shore and to tell the others in the boat who waits there for them on shore. There is a connection between our love for Jesus and our seeing him.

Peter and John return to their homes. They at least believe the news Mary brings to them, that the tomb is empty, but they are unsure of what has happened. They do not yet understand the scriptures about Jesus. They are only beginning to remember his words that he must suffer and die to reconcile those who believe in him to God. Mary stays behind at the empty tomb to weep as the disciples have not found Jesus' body. They have only verified what Mary has told them, that the tomb is empty. Peter and John at least believe Mary's words that the stone is rolled back and the tomb is empty. John may believe that Jesus is risen from the dead but he does not yet understand what that means. Jesus' rising is not like Lazarus' resuscitation when he was raised from the dead to die again. Jesus did not need to be set free from his grave clothes. Something else has happened, something new, something the disciples have yet to understand.

After her return from carrying the news of an empty tomb to the disciples, Mary is alone again at the tomb, weeping. It is now light enough for her to see inside. She looks into the tomb and sees two angels and talks with them, but she is still focused on finding Jesus' dead body. They ask her why she is weeping, as they know this is no day for weeping. This is a day for rejoicing. She turns from the tomb and the angels and sees a person she does not recognize. The

person who has arrived asks one of the same questions the angels asked Mary. He asks her whom she is looking for. That this person knows she is looking for Jesus' body gives her hope that the one speaking to her might have knowledge of where Jesus' body can be found. She thinks she is talking with a gardener who might have taken Jesus' body away, Mary is still focused on finding Jesus' lifeless body. Her love for Jesus moves her to speak and search every avenue with hope. Then everything changes for Mary. She hears her name, in words spoken by Jesus, and she recognizes him. We too can recognize Jesus when we hear his words shared with us. We also can come to the empty tomb and hear our names called by Jesus. Mary calls Jesus "Rabbouni" or teacher, a low title for the king of the universe, and seeks to hold on to him to stay in his presence, to be with him. Mary has been asked, "Why are you weeping?" as Jesus also wants her to realize this is no day for weeping. This is a day for rejoicing. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Mary wants to stay with Jesus in this place, but Jesus has other things for her to do. Jesus has another message for her to carry to the disciples as she earlier carried the message of the empty tomb. We should notice that when Jesus sends Mary with a message, he sends her to his brothers. Jesus calls the disciples his brothers. Jesus has made a shift in how he refers to those who follow him. We are now Jesus' brothers and sisters. We have a new relationship with Jesus. A new relationship is another reason we gather on Easter morning to watch the sunrise and it is another reason that we gather to celebrate our risen Lord. Everything changed when the tomb was found empty by Mary, Peter, and John. Our relationship with God was changed forever when Mary saw the risen Lord early on the first day of the week. Mary wants to stay with Jesus, to be with him in the same relationship of love that she had with him before the cross. But Jesus is ascending to the Father and has work for Mary to do. She is to go to Jesus' brothers and give them a message. She is to tell them Jesus is ascending to "my Father and your Father, my God and your God." Jesus has appeared first to Mary and gives her work to do, to begin to explain the empty tomb, to be a witness to a resurrected Lord, the first born of the dead, to begin to carry the message that Christ has risen! He has risen indeed! The empty tomb and a risen Lord bring reconciliation to God through Jesus' death and resurrection. Satan's victory on Friday becomes his total defeat. On the first Easter morning, Mary does not just discover an empty tomb with the stone rolled back so that Jesus' disciples could see that it is empty, but she also sees the risen Jesus and begins to spread the Good News that Christ has risen! He is risen indeed! Mary begins to tell others that those who believe in Jesus are now his brothers and sisters and we are invited

into a new relationship with God as our Father. It will take time for followers of Jesus to begin to grasp what it means that the tomb is empty and that Mary has seen the risen Lord. They may believe her that the tomb is empty, as Peter and John have also gone to the tomb and verified her words, but her message that she has seen the Lord will need to be verified by other appearances of Jesus. Before this day is over, others will join with her as witnesses to the risen Lord, as Jesus is seen by his disciples and they also begin to believe that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Mary's mission on that first day of the week to go to the tomb and weep there is transformed into a new mission, a mission all followers of Jesus have, to share the Good News that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

We come to Easter morning to share in Mary's Easter experience and to recall that she went to the grave early while it was still dark and ran to tell others that the tomb was open, and Jesus' body was gone. She returns to the tomb to search for Jesus who is not there. Her weeping that had begun on Good Friday with Jesus' death is transformed into joy from having seen the Lord. Her mission to find Jesus' body has become a new mission to share the news of an empty tomb and a risen Lord with all she meets. She has a message that through our risen Lord our relationship with God is transformed forever. Christ still rises in the hearts of new believers as they see him, but those who have not met Jesus need someone to go to them and share the Good News that the tomb is empty and that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We have been invited into the loving relationship that Jesus has with the Father and the Father has with him. The tomb is empty. May we also realize that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And go forth into all the world and share the Good News.

*Pray with me: Jesus, help us to see the empty tomb. Jesus, bless us to see you this morning as Mary did on that first Easter Sunday through the witness of our sisters and brothers gathered here and gathering on this day all across the world. Lord, help us to hear your voice sending us out into the world to your brothers and sisters, and give us courage to go and tell all we meet that we have seen the Lord. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Brothers and sisters in Christ, go forth and tell the world that the tomb is empty, and we have seen the risen Lord! Amen.