

## *Whom Do You Seek?*

John 20: 1-18

Every gospel text for this season aims one way or another to bring the faithful to the empty tomb. In different gospels, they're different people, somewhat different times, experiencing somewhat different things, and reacting in different ways. In each instance, we would expect that the disciple coming upon the empty tomb with the stone rolled away is going to be asking themselves, "Where'd he go?"

None of our accounts have the disciples coming upon the tomb and saying to themselves, "Oh, yeah. That's right. He mentioned resurrection." Right, that didn't happen at all.

What is agreed upon in all accounts of the empty tomb is that it was early in morning when some member or members of the faithful went to the tomb. In the gospel of John, the editor notes not only that it was early morning, but that it was "still dark." John's gospel has played with the imagery of light and dark from its opening words in chapter 1. It's no surprise that the editor exploits this opportunity. The darkness of the early morning hour provides the symbolic backdrop for a light-filled revelation about the truth of Jesus.

Here only in John, Mary goes **alone** to the tomb. We have no explanation why she was going there. In Matthew, an anointing is undertaken, a rather odd thing to do on the third day. Without explanation, we can imagine that the listener, the audience, knows exactly why she went to the tomb early in the morning of the third day; it doesn't need explanation. Also, John uniquely identifies Mary as Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Magdala in Galilee, someone who may have known Jesus for years.

Mary arrives and she's stunned to find the stone rolled away. She has seen enough to know that Jesus wasn't in there, so she runs back to where the disciples have been staying to tell the others.

Her news prompts Peter and a mysterious disciple referred to only in John as "the beloved disciple" to run to the tomb. (No, no scholar has any real idea who "the beloved disciple" is.) Mary likely wasn't far behind the fleet-footed fellas, but for now the narrator has dropped her from the scene.

The focus shifts to the two disciples arriving at the tomb. The "beloved disciple" sees the tomb is empty, while ever-impulsive Peter goes right inside. Peter sees the burial clothes but no body, no corpse. Then the "beloved disciple" enters as well. The presence of grave clothes left behind indicates that it wasn't grave robbery; no one would have taken the time or effort to remove the clothes.

In a confusing sequence, it says: *he [the beloved disciple] saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.* We have to infer just what the beloved disciple "saw and believed." Was it what he saw or didn't

see? Presumably the text is telling us that this disciple believed through this experience, contrasting the experience with how others would learn later, from scripture. In other words, this disciple wasn't taught about resurrection and came to believe, rather he was a witness to the resurrection and believed. Note that it does **not** say the same realization occurred to Peter or to Mary. Their level of awareness and understanding of all this is up for grabs at this point.

So far, we have Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple all having **seen** inside the tomb at some point, with the guys having actually **gone** inside, and no one has seen anything or anyone.

The guys, being guys, scratch their heads, think, "Wow, that's strange. I wonder what happened." Then they likely realize something else is critically wrong. 'It's morning. We're awake. We're hungry. Let's get some breakfast.' and off they go. On Easter morning, the guys scratch their heads, rub their bellies, and walk off. The editor has placed the men at the scene, but has them appear quite clueless and worse, useless.

However, Mary is still there as she returns to the scene in the next verse as standing outside the tomb weeping. Why doesn't Mary return with the guys? And we can go back to the question of why Mary was going to the tomb on the third day at all? There is a rabbinic teaching from that era which states that the third day after a death is the time when the greatest grief and mourning should be expressed for the deceased. The visible grieving and mourning is nothing with which the men would have been involved; that was a woman's role. Still, only Mary is doing this?

She bends over to get a good look inside while she's doing her grieving, and two angels sat within. As happens in all four gospels (not something that happens too often), Mary gets challenged about her grieving: *Why are you crying?* The angels express confusion that she is grieving *and* there is **no** dead body present. Mary expresses no surprise at angels (or anything) being inside the tomb. Presumably her acts of grieving were sufficiently deep to have allowed individuals (or angels) entry to the tomb. She simply accepts their appearance, but cannot accept the disappearance of Jesus' body.

Mary tells them how the dead body is missing, having been taken away apparently. This is interesting as we now have someone grieving over a body that cannot be seen or even found. There is no reply from the occupants of the tomb whose role in the story seems oddly unhelpful and unnecessary except as a distraction.

Still outside the tomb and looking in, Mary turned to find someone standing near her. He asks also, *Woman, why are you crying? Whom do you seek?* She thinks he's the gardener or caretaker or someone who might know something. Ah, he suggested the body, right? – *who are you looking for* – so she asks where *he* has taken the body so she can get it.

She does not recognize the one to whom she is speaking. When he calls her by name, "Mary," she finally recognizes Jesus. While it is reminiscent of the resurrection story in Luke about the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus – they had Jesus

walking with them, but only recognized him after the breaking of bread – we’ve come to expect the disciples’ failure in recognizing Jesus, failing to comprehend his being, his transcendence, his sonship, and even his mission as the Promised One from God. Remember this, that Jesus is not recognized by those who should know him until Jesus discloses himself.

Jesus tells Mary not to hold onto him. It isn’t as though he’s about to ascend and she cannot come along. It isn’t as though touching him was an issue; Jesus will invite Thomas to touch his body in just a few verses further in ch. 20. It is a reminder that **everything has changed**. In other words, no, Jesus has not returned to stay, or to resume his earthly ministry, or to pick things up where they had left off. Jesus is telling her that **everything has changed** and *won’t* be returning to the way things had been. Jesus makes it clear that, at some point, he will ascend to be with his Father in heaven. The disciples now need to start thinking in new ways, and Mary is given the job of telling them so.

Mary then returns to the other disciples relating, *I have seen the Lord!* Again, the emphasis is on **seeing, recognizing, finally** understanding. Let’s recall that when she first saw Jesus, she saw the gardener. When she says she has seen the Lord, she is not simply making a statement of evidence; it is now a profession of faith, a profession of a resurrection faith.

But let’s also remember that **everything has changed**. Jesus is no longer the Jesus that they’d all known before. Some disclosure needs to be made by Jesus for those who knew him to be able to see him, to recognize him. And while it’s a stunning revelation for these disciples to behold Jesus, to see him and to recognize him, none of them really seems to understand much of anything about this Jesus. Everything has changed, but it’s clear that these disciples are no better informed than the rest of the disciples. Jesus’s resurrection appearances frankly won’t do a whole lot for them either.

One of the familiar things about the story of Easter morning is the simple humanness of the witnesses to the resurrection. Frankly the story is quite **understated** as the strange events play out around confused disciples. It enables us to connect to this story. Like the disciples, we have the desire to know, too: where is Jesus?

Here again we’re reminded that it is an empty tomb. There is no Jesus there. No, death could not hold him there. The stone was rolled away, leaving the impression that maybe he simply walked out, having somehow transcended the ghastly crucifixion that he had suffered and endured. The tomb is empty and reveals no answers.

We’re invited to seek now, to discover how Jesus is revealed. I don’t mean that we’re invited to read the Bible and underline all the places where Jesus makes a resurrection appearance. No, I mean seek where Jesus can be found among us now.

In the church, you might be guessing? Guess again. Maybe he’s in heaven perhaps, awaiting your arrival. That’s a nice thought. But that isn’t among us now. And the conclusion is that we ought to hurry up and die to get there. Jesus didn’t say that.

He does tell us where he can be found. You remember the passage. It's in Matthew 25 and, with a touch of editing, it goes like this:

*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you [in such circumstances]?” And the [Lord] will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

Whom do you seek? A personal Savior who will make your sinfulness go away? A heavenly greeter who awaits your arrival? A loving friend with holy connections who can make miracles happen for you and others? Jesus isn't in the empty tomb. If we seek him, he can be found.

Whom do you seek?