

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/17/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Easter Sunday: The Resurrection of the Lord

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, April 17th

John 20:1-18

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The most important event in human history

On the first Easter morning Mary Magdalene discovers an empty tomb and the body of her beloved Lord missing. She runs to find Peter and John in a state of panicked grief that only compounds the horror of witnessing Jesus being executed on a cross. An hour or two later she is retracing her same steps back from the empty tomb but this time she is bringing a very different message. An encounter with the risen Christ has completely transformed her and the Good News she brings continues to transform lives today.

¹Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

Jesus had died on the cross on Friday around 3:00 PM (Luke 23:44). Since the Sabbath was due to start Friday evening, by the time Joseph of Arimathea had secured the body of Jesus there was not enough time to prepare Jesus' body appropriately for burial before the Sabbath began. In Luke's Gospel the women (identified in Mark 16:1 as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome) went to see where the tomb was so they could return after the Sabbath to finish the preparation. The Sabbath would have been over on Saturday evening; however, it would have been dark. Therefore the women would have returned around dawn on Sunday morning. The women were back at the tomb as early as they could have possibly been. In John's account it is still dark.

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 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.

A sense of sheer urgency exudes from these next verses. On seeing the empty tomb Mary Magdalene runs to find Peter - who is now the default leader. The fact that Mary exclaims, "... we do not know where they have laid him" suggests she was not alone in her pre-dawn visit. It is also obvious she is overcome with grief - the only physical remains of her Lord have been taken. This is loss upon loss. Both Peter and the other disciple "*the one whom Jesus loved*" (who is almost certainly John, the son of Zebedee, brother of James and author of this Gospel) run to the tomb. Perhaps John is younger since he reaches the tomb first. Acknowledging Peter as the elder, John waits for Peter to arrive and allows Peter to go into the tomb first.

⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there,
⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

A breathless Peter arrives at the tomb and enters. He sees the linen cloths lying there. If the body had simply been moved, it is most likely the burial cloths would also be missing also. There are examples of grave robbers stealing the grave cloths but leaving the body but not the other way around! In recent years much has been made of the fact that the face cloth (Greek is *soudarion* which is of Latin origin and means *sweat*) was found folded in a place by itself. We are always at risk of reading into the text cultural meanings of our own. It is enough to say that the folded face cloth indicates the body was not stolen (thieves would hardly take the time to fold the face cloth) and suggests that Christ had taken it off Himself and folded it neatly.

⁸ Then the other disciple, who had 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 went back to their homes.

Now we have two male witnesses to the empty tomb and discarded grave cloths. This means such testimony would be admissible under Jewish law (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). The statement that the other disciple *saw and believed* is the source of much debate. Was it belief in Mary Magdalene's statement or belief in the resurrection? Did Peter already realize what had happened and then John believed when he saw? Verse 9 is clear that at this point (before the arrival of the Holy Spirit) Jesus' disciples did not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead. This also indicates that the disciples were not attempting to orchestrate events or fabricate a story to fit their ideas of what was predicted.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one 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."

Mary Magdalene in her grief remains outside the tomb after the two men leave. As she stoops to look into the tomb, she sees a much different sight. The description of two angels in white is consistent with how angels appear in the Scriptures (in pairs: Acts 1:10; in white: Ezekiel 9:2; Daniel 10:5-6; Revelation 15:6). Her grief and tears must be obvious as one of the angels asks her why she is weeping. In giving the reason for her grief to one of the angels, she responds in the same way as in verse 2 but this time it is more personal - ...*my Lord... I do not know...*

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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."

Mary now turns and sees Jesus who she mistakes for the gardener. Perhaps it was still dark and thus did not immediately recognize Him. She was also looking through eyes that had been crying. Perhaps the resurrected body of Jesus was youthful in appearance and in perfect health so that He did not look like Jesus did even before His recent disfigurement. Another factor is that Mary was not expecting to see Jesus. The gardener reference is interesting. Adam was the original gardener in the Garden of Eden; Christ, the second Adam, through His perfect life, sacrificial death and resurrection has restored the relationship with God that existed in the Garden of Eden before the fall.

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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 that he had said these things to her.

Jesus calls Mary by her name and she immediately recognizes Him. Jesus as the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by their name, and they know His voice (John 10:3-4). Mary then clings (lays hold of, fastens to, touches) to Jesus. This indicates Jesus is physically present in His resurrection body and not as a spirit or some sort of mirage. Jesus' physical body had not yet ascended into heaven (Acts 1:6-11). Mary Magdalene is then commissioned to bring the Good News of Christ's resurrection to the disciples. The first evangelist was a woman?

Reflections

For many, the present state of the church this Easter is disheartening. If the trend before Covid was already inescapable, the last two years have witnessed further accelerated decline of the institutional church. The church in the west is dying; but just like the tomb has no relevance to Jesus today, the church buildings and institutions of the past are not necessarily where the Church is to be found today. Indeed, the death of the institutional church in our time offers an opportunity for the resurrection of an institutional church that is centered on the Gospel rather than one focused on moralistic legalism at one extreme or social activism at the other.

Irrespective of whether churches are open, closed, growing or declining, the tomb is still open. As a result of this empty tomb, the world would never be the same again. Since that first Easter morning and the eventual coming of the Holy Spirit, individual lives and entire nations have been transformed. Indeed, the very trajectory of the human race has been altered by the resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ has real implications for how we live today. For those who do not believe in the resurrection, the world is all there is. There is no hope. The best such can expect is to become distracted by the world and seek to fill the empty hole in their lives with something. To those who believe in the resurrection, not only is there hope, but we also play a part of bringing this hope to others. Our lives have real purpose and meaning. To resurrection people, the world becomes secondary.

Jesus told Martha:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25,26)

This question is also posed to us. Do we live like we believe in the resurrection?

He is Risen!