

A sermon preached on Easter, March 31, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Acts 10:34-43. Psalm 1118:1-2, 14-24. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. John 20:1-18

Most of us have heard the Easter Gospel many times. We know the story. Yet I wonder, what if there is more to this story than any of us have yet understood...more depths, more wisdom, more help for living in our violent, divided, war torn world than we have known?

Down through the centuries, many Christian communities have focused on Easter, not just for one Sunday, but throughout the 50 Days between Easter and Pentecost. Why? Because there's always more to discover in this mysterious event than any of us have recognized and experienced. So, for the next 7 Sundays, our Scripture readings will focus on different ways people experienced of the Resurrection of Christ.

What caught my attention in the Resurrection Gospel this year, was how difficult and confusing it was for the 1st disciples to recognize and trust that Christ really had risen and was alive.

The Gospel begins by telling us that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb when it was still dark. Mary was so eager to give Jesus a proper burial that she broke the Sabbath early to get there before anyone else. And notice how radical it is that Mary is the first one to go to the tomb. Some scholars think Mary had been a prostitute, others think that she had struggled with mental illness or demons. Women and especially women with these kinds of problems were pushed to the margins of society at that time. Yet Jesus had respected this social and religious outcast and healed her from her problems, whatever they were, so she became one of his regular followers. Out of deep gratitude, she wanted to give Jesus a final goodbye by anointing his body with burial spices.

When she arrived at the tomb, she saw that the huge stone had been rolled away from the entrance. Her immediate assumption was that someone had stolen Jesus' body. In panic, she ran back to tell Peter and John that someone had stolen the body of Jesus and she had no idea where they had taken it.

Peter and John also panicked and ran together to the tomb to see for themselves. John got there first. He bent down, looked into the tomb and saw the linen shroud that had been wrapped around Jesus lying there, but he didn't go into the tomb. Then Peter arrived, huffing and puffing, and with his impulsive nature, he immediately went right into the tomb. He saw the linen shroud lying there. Like a good detective, he also noticed the cloth which had been wrapped around the head of Jesus was not dropped onto the shroud or the ground but was carefully folded and in a place by itself. As he mentioned this, John also came into the cave with him to see the details. Perhaps they both thought that the body must not have been stolen, because thieves would have worked quickly and not taken time to carefully fold that head cloth. Notice, it says that John saw and believed, but it doesn't say that Peter believed. Perhaps Peter thought that Jesus might have risen, but he never expected to see him again.

So, the first people to see the empty tomb had difficulty figuring out what had happened and what it all meant. Perhaps some of us feel like those first visitors to the tomb. Christ might have risen, but so what? What does that mean for us?

Peter and John returned to their homes, thinking they had seen all there was to see. But Mary stayed at the tomb. She still believed that Christ's body had been stolen. So, she persisted in wanting to find out who had taken the body and where they'd taken it. It may take persistence like Mary's for us to really discover what the mysterious resurrection of Jesus means for our lives!

Mary began to weep. That's what we humans often do when we feel great loss, great frustration, great confusion. In her grief she bent over and looked into the tomb for the first time. Unexpectedly, she saw 2 angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. Perhaps God honored Mary's loving persistence and sent the angels to help and guide her. Perhaps she was so focused on finding where the body of Jesus was, she didn't even recognize that they were angels! The angels asked with gentleness and compassion, "Woman why are you weeping?" Mary blurted out her consuming question: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Notice, she called Jesus Lord, the title of the Messiah God had promised to send to save the world from its self-inflicted misery.

Without waiting for a response from the angels, Mary sensed that someone was outside the tomb, so she turned around and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. I wonder how often God's angel messengers or the Spirit of Christ, come to us, but we don't recognize them, perhaps because we are so focused on our fears, our personal projects and responsibilities?

Jesus asked Mary the same question the angels asked: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Let's pause with this question for a moment. At this time in your life, what causes you feel like weeping? What problems weigh heavily on your heart and mind? It might be a personal burden or fear; it might be the violence, wars and divisions ripping apart our nation and world? Jesus always wants us to tell him what is breaking open our hearts. Whether we recognize him or not, Jesus simply stays with us, listening for our response, as he listened to Mary.

Mary, imagining that he was the gardener, blurted out, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." We can't help but admire Mary for her loving persistence.

I imagine Jesus smiling at her request...and at her distracted blindness...then saying with gentle compassion, Mary! That familiar voice calling her by name woke her up to recognize Jesus right there with her, fully alive! With shock, awe, and overwhelming gratitude she cried out, Rabbouni, which means, beloved teacher! She reached out with joy and love to embrace Jesus, but he said, don't hold on to me, imagining you can keep me here always. I will soon ascend to my Father in heaven. Right now, I want you to go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Immediately, Mary went, my guess is that she ran with excitement, to announce to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord", and then tell them all he had asked her to tell them.

Even though Mary enthusiastically told the disciples that she had seen the Lord alive and he had talked with her, some of the disciples did not believe her. Was it because she was a woman? Was it because they thought no one could return to life after being crucified to death?

The questions and doubts of the first disciples help us realize that we also may find it difficult to recognize and trust when the Spirit of Christ visits us, or when others tell us about their experience

of the Risen Christ. Those who did come to trust Jesus' resurrection presence with them, did so because, like Mary, they experienced the presence of Jesus in their lives very personally.

Before Jesus was crucified, he told his disciples that it would be better for them that he go away, because then he would send his Holy Spirit to be with them, dwelling in their bodies, minds and hearts always. This was the same Spirit that guided and worked through Christ during his ministry, the same Spirit that empowered Christ to endure all the injustice, violence, pain and evil that was focused on him in his trial, beatings, crucifixion and then raised him from the dead to continue his mission of helping the human race learn to love God and to love and forgive all neighbors, including their enemies.

So, as promised, the Spirit of the Risen Jesus continues to be with you and me, with every person, to guide us always. And, like the first disciples, often we are not aware of God's presence. If we are focused only on ourselves, on our agendas, thoughts and projects, on our fears and worries, our screens, we also may be blinded and unaware of God's presence. If we really want to experience the Presence of the Risen Christ, we must be persistent, as Mary was persistent, in seeking God's presence and guidance. God will not force us to be aware. Jesus promised, I'll be with you always, now the ball is in your court. Will you seek me, like Mary did? Will you make time to listen to me, follow my guidance on a daily basis? If you don't seek, you may not find, even though I'm always right there with you.

Mary, the most unlikely person in her society, was the first person Jesus talked with personally after his Resurrection. You may feel that you are an unlikely person for Jesus to spend time with. Yet, what if today, this week, throughout this Easter season, really for the rest of your life, the Spirit of the Risen Jesus will be very personally keep seeking you, seeking each of us, wondering if we will recognize his presence, hear him speaking to us, and follow the guidance he will give us, so we can carry on his mission of love for God and all our neighbors in our daily lives?

Let us close our eyes for a few moments: in the silence, I invite you to be as aware as you can of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus being here with us right now...if you can't be aware, perhaps you can imagine that the Spirit of Christ really could be here with us now....Then imagine Jesus asking you: What area your greatest fears, the heaviest burdens you are carrying at this time that make you most want to weep? In the silence, tell Jesus what most concern you.... Then imagine Jesus, with a smile and with great compassion, calling you by name...is there any message you sense Jesus might want to say to you now?... Don't worry if you are not aware now...Jesus will keep coming and speaking to you until you are able to recognize his loving presence with you...

O Risen Christ, there is so much that we don't know or understand about how you lived and loved and healed and forgave and rose from the dead; and so much we don't understand about how your Spirit continues to come to us day by day to lovingly guide and help us. We ask you to give us a desire to seek you more persistently this week, like Mary did. Open our eyes to recognize more clearly how and when you are with us, helping and guiding us. In ways beyond what we can understand, help us to love our neighbors generously, as you loved; let your love flow through us helping us fulfill the purpose for which you sent us to this troubled planet at this particular time, through the power of your Holy Spirit at work within us. Amen