

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

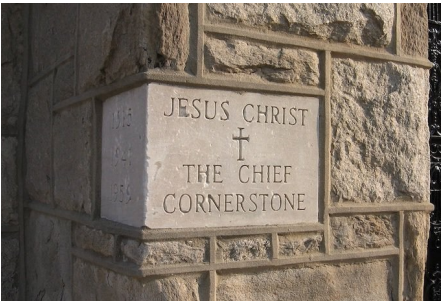
EASTER SUNDAY – YEAR A

Psalm 117 (118)

This psalm was first used for the Liturgy of Thanksgiving at the Feast of Tabernacles. On this day, small tents made of branches recalled the lightly-built dwellings occupied by the people during their 40-year crossing of the desert, following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. It is a very joyful festival lasting seven days; the people would dance around the altar waving branches, rejoicing that 'the Lord's right hand is exalted'; now they would not die, but live to 'recount the deeds of the Lord'.

The psalm is constructed as a form of dialogue where different groups praise the Lord in turn: the sons of Israel (the people in general); the sons of Aaron (the priests: verses omitted this week); and those who fear the Lord (perhaps those who believe in God but are not Jews). God's love has no end, for 'his mercy endures forever'.

Jesus would have sung this psalm every year of his life on earth, for it is one of the psalms sung at the end of the Passover meal.



'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'

Matthew, Mark and Luke all saw Jesus in the stone rejected by the builders (Matthew 21: 42), for Jesus would become the cornerstone of the Christian Church.

Gospel John 20: 1–9

No evangelist describes the actual resurrection, yet it is at the core of our Christian faith. John gives the fullest description of events around it; he has a keen eye for detail. Unsurprisingly, the accounts of all four evangelists differ slightly from one another, probably as a result of oral transmission of events, and the specific preoccupations or focus of each writer.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark

The time of day is significant. Throughout John's Gospel we find this contrast between light and darkness. The gloom echoes the way Mary feels at the death of her friend Jesus. It could also reflect her lack of understanding of the events which have taken place.

'We do not know ...'

Although only Mary of Magdala is mentioned by name here, she was apparently not alone at the tomb. Indeed the other evangelists mention several women by name (Mary, the mother of James, Salome, Joanna). Mary Magdalen herself is a key witness to the death and resurrection of the Lord, despite her standing. John, always respectful of women – see the account of the Samaritan woman at the well, or Martha, Lazarus's sister – gives her a prominent part, despite the contemporary culture where women had a very low social status and importance.

Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved

Tradition has generally seen John the Evangelist, son of Zebedee, in 'the beloved disciple'. However, more recent scholarship suggests that 'the one Jesus loved' was more than a historical person in the life of Jesus, and also 'a symbol of the role that every faithful disciple would play in the life of the Church' (Peter Edmonds S.J.). There are many instances in John's Gospel where 'the other disciple' is given more prominence than Peter (13: 23, 18: 15, 19: 26, 21:7), though here the evangelist is more balanced. It is the unnamed disciple who arrives first at the tomb, but it is Peter, the impulsive one, who shows initiative and leadership by going into it. Nevertheless, it is 'the one Jesus loved' who first believes in the resurrection here.

Peter ... stooping to look in

Contemporary archaeological research shows that, at the time, a 3-foot tall entrance led into cave-like tombs.

The linen cloths

John gives a very specific account of the position and state of the linen cloths. The carefully folded linens attest to the fact that the body has not been stolen or spirited away. John's audience will remember Lazarus emerging from his tomb, 'his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face'.

As yet they did not understand the Scripture.

The disciples needed to experience the resurrection to understand the Old Testament prophecies. In fact, there are few references to resurrection in Scripture (Hosea 6: 3, Jonah 2: 1, Isaiah 53: 10–13, Psalm 16/17: 8–11). They will only fully understand after Pentecost.