

SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY
April 8, 2012

Scriptures: Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1-8

The Resurrection Through the Eyes of Mary Magdalen, Peter, and John

_____ “They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.” That’s what Mark wrote when telling the story of the Resurrection. Even after seeing the empty tomb, they were not entirely convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. Even though the scriptures had spoken about the living Savior, the disciples just did not get it. The Old Testament has these words of Job, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.”

More than the Old Testament words, were the words and actions of Jesus himself. Jesus said that he was the **Living** Water, the Bread of **Life**, the Way, the Truth, and the **Life**— the Resurrection and the **Life**. Everyone who believes on Him will not perish, but will have everlasting **life**. Jesus had given the example of Jonah who was in the dark belly of a large fish for three days before he was spat out again. Jonah was inside the fish and for all intents and purposes was dead, yet his life was given back to him. So, too, Jesus would be inside the tomb, among the dead for three days before he would rise from the dead.

It is not really surprising that the followers of Jesus had a hard time grasping the Resurrection, for they had never fully accepted the fact that Jesus was going to be put to death. He spoke often of the cross he had to bear, the death he had to die in order to fulfill his purpose for coming to this world. Those disciples, and all those who followed him were just ordinary men and women. Many of them were looking for a Messiah, a Savior to rescue them from their hard lives. They were looking for a king who would knock the present royalty off the throne. They wanted someone to end the oppression of the Romans. They had heard the prophecies which did foretell a Savior

who would one day be ruler over all the earth, a king sent from God. What they did not understand was that Jesus would die on the cross, be buried, and he would rise again. He would go back to heaven, ascending to his Father, but one day He would come again. They got Jesus first and second comings mixed up.

The angel told the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter, who was also a disciple, that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. The stone had been rolled away, and Jesus was alive again! I always like to make one thing very clear on Easter morning, and that is to say the Jesus really did die! He was put to death by people who hated him, and his death was painful and terrible. I especially want children to know that. Jesus was really dead, and God raised him up from the dead. Jesus lives forever and ever. It was not a magic trick, and it was not a miracle of science and medicine. Jesus was dead, and by the third day his body would have started to decay and to smell. That's why the women brought the spices to the tomb that Sunday morning. They were going to wrap Jesus' body up with spices so that the smell would not be so overwhelming.

Death is our enemy, and Jesus has destroyed our enemy. There is, I believe, a danger in our culture to make death seem a little too nice. I use the word "nice" deliberately. My former students would tell you my thoughts on the word "nice." Those students liked to write papers which used the word nice over and over again. Write a report on what you did on your vacation. They would write, "My vacation was nice. I went to my grandparents house. They were nice. We went swimming and that was nice."

Anyway, we tend to make death a little too nice, perhaps because of modern pain medications which help the days leading up to death to be easier for both the one who is dying and for loved ones. People will say, "We're celebrating his life, or her life,

we aren't grieving. Our loved one is so much better off now. We can't be sad!" Some of you might misunderstand what I am going to say, but I'll say it anyway. All of those things may very well be true. We do celebrate the life of our loved one. We do believe he or she is in a better place. But still I say, "Rubbish!" Grief and sadness are what we do because our enemy death has taken away the person we loved. Jesus stood outside the tomb of his good friend Lazarus who had been dead for days and the smell was overwhelming. And what did Jesus do? He wept. Shortest verse in the Bible, but how powerful it is! Jesus wept.

Before you all start thinking that I don't get what this day is all about, what happened in the garden at the tomb, let me assure you that I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ with all my mind and spirit. And I know that all of us who believe in Him will also have life after this life, eternal life after earthly physical death. I do not know how I could go on each day if that were not true. When I do funerals and memorial services here in this beautiful church, I believe in my heart that I will see each of those who in faith shared these pews. If we had nothing else to do today, I would read the list of names of all those dear ones who have died since I came here. I smile thinking of it, because I know that they, each of them, faced the dreadful enemy death, and their loved ones mourned for them. **But I know that they know that the enemy was destroyed!**

And, yes, I do know that sometimes death does come as a blessing, especially when someone has suffered a long time. And when someone we love has lost all mental functioning and most physical functioning, and the real person is no longer in that body, we do sigh and say, "It is a blessing." But all that led up to that last breath is part and parcel of the enemy— death. Yet, we do not know the mind of God, or why events happen as they do. We do know that God gives to each of us the precious gift of a life to live on this earth. And God will also give us the gift of eternal life in heaven.

Mark says that the women at the tomb were trembling in fear and did not know what to do. Death does awful things to us. We have a feeling of bewilderment, a lostness. We don't know what to do. Mary Magdalen and the women couldn't anoint the body of Jesus, there was no body. So, what could they do? John tells the Easter story in a little different way. Mary Magdalen went back to the garden and there she spoke to two angels, and to a man she thought was the gardener. Maybe, he had taken the body, she thought. It is one of the loveliest stories in the Bible. Mary was grief-stricken and crying. The angels asked why she was crying, and she said, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." Then Mary turned and saw the man she thought was the gardener. It was Jesus, but Mary did not recognize his resurrected body. Jesus, too, asked why she was crying, and she responded in the same way as before. At that point all it took was one word. Jesus spoke her name, and when he said "Mary" she immediately knew that it was Jesus.

Peter and John, when they were told that the tomb was empty, ran to see for themselves. They looked all around seeing the linen folded up. They did not understand what had happened, and they did not hang around the garden waiting to find out. They went back home again. At the early service this morning, I talked about when Simon Peter and John saw the Risen Lord with their own eyes. They were in their boats and saw Jesus on the shore cooking fish and bread over hot coals. They had been fishing all night, but had not caught anything. They did not know who it was at first, but when Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and they got a huge catch of fish they recognized him. Jesus had performed almost exactly the same fishing miracle on that post-resurrection day as he had when he first called the fishermen to follow him and told them he would make them fishers of men.

When Peter and John saw Jesus with their own eyes they believed. Mary Magdalen had told them that Jesus was alive, but they needed to see for themselves.

Seeing Jesus, risen from the dead, changed them into powerful witnesses for Him. You and I do not have the privilege of seeing the Risen Lord with our own eyes, but we can see Him through eyes of faith. Another post-resurrection story in the book of John is the one where Thomas insisted that he could not believe that it was Jesus unless he could put his fingers into holes in Jesus' hands and his fist into the hole in Jesus' side. When Thomas did that, he immediately said, "My Lord and my God!" You know what the great part of that story is? Jesus said something that was meant for all people for all generations. What Jesus said is for you too. Here it is. "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." We who believe in our risen Savior are blessed!

Death is the enemy of life. Paul writing to the church in Corinth wrote, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Death and sin, suffering and pain, sickness and crying have all been conquered by Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. Do you believe that? The eyes of Mary Magdalen, Peter, John, and Thomas all saw Jesus and were convinced that he was alive. I believe that Jesus Christ lives, and I believe that one day I will see Him with my own eyes. It is Easter Sunday, the greatest day on the Christian calendar. Let's celebrate it by keeping our eyes of faith open so that we do not miss any opportunities to see the Risen Christ. He is alive!

