

“Nothing to Prove”

A sermon preached by

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 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 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who 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 returned to their homes. ¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because 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 she told them that he had said these things to her

On a January evening ten years ago, Kav Temperley, the lead singer and songwriter for the alternative rock band *Eskimo Joe*, was in New York City playing a gig. It was snowing that evening; Kav described it as a magical moment in the city. When the band arrived at the club, they found out that the actor Heath Ledger had died that night. He'd died just two blocks away from where they were walking at the time. Ledger was also from Temperley's hometown of Perth, Australia. Later, Temperley wrote *Foreign Land*, a song about Ledger's death halfway across the globe from his homeland. Temperley would write of this moment, "we were in New York City, this big foreign city, and I felt this immense loneliness of this kid from my hometown dying by himself there."¹

One of the things we often fail to remember in the story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion is that he and his disciples were not from Jerusalem. They were not Judeans; instead they had traveled to Jerusalem over 100 miles from Galilee. Some have described them as country bumpkins in comparison to the urbanites of Jerusalem. They were clearly from a different region. Their dress, their appearance, and their accents betrayed them as being from a foreign land. Matthew refers to this directly as Peter is being questioned after Jesus' arrest. In John's gospel, they know that Peter is a Galilean without any reference to his accent. Like most outsiders visiting a foreign city then or today, they would have been easy to spot.

So the absolute loneliness and despair the disciples must have felt from Jesus' death had to have been multiplied by the fact that they were surrounded by a foreign reality. Like the millions of immigrants who have come to this country. Like the Syrian families our congregation has been supporting. The disciples must have struggled in the face of their leader's death to know what was next...what to expect, what to do.

In the face of this reality, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. Like so many of us in the early stages of death's disorienting grasp, she is simply looking for something normal, something regular to do. Perhaps unable to sleep, she makes her initial trip to the tomb still in the symbolic darkness that has overtaken her and the rest of the disciples, unable to comprehend, to know or see or believe what has happened. The story of her journey to and from the tomb is very much like this life changing reality that has come with their master's death.

¹ Foreign Land, www.wikipedia.com

In the story, John's author lays out a proof, a detail that points toward a reality that there is something extraordinary at work here. Gone are the *usual* explanations for these *unusual* circumstances. When the disciples finally go inside the tomb, they see the linen wrappings rolled up neatly and lying there. It's a proof that Jesus' body wasn't stolen by grave robbers, a common occurrence in Jesus' time, because robbers would not have left the valuable fabric behind.

But as Wes Howard-Brook writes, "It is also a social criticism, because the Judean method of burial would have placed meticulous obedience to their burial ethos."² Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as Judeans, would have paid particular attention to this detail. To not wrap Jesus carefully in the linens would have been like burying a loved one in their swimsuit. But what the gospel writer is saying is that you cannot continue to understand Jesus only within these Judean traditions, there is something more universal at work here.

And in the end, the reality of Jesus' resurrection has to move beyond the Judean or Galilean customs. He must be unbound from the tomb of their own understandings and sensibilities. Finding the grave clothes laid aside is another way of saying that we will no longer be bound up in the darkness of the tomb...that the light of the world will shine even beyond any experience of death.

There is not an immediate *ah ha* moment. New life doesn't come *knocking on heaven's door* like a bolt of lightning. Instead, it comes to Mary in bits and pieces, first in the darkness of a tomb that has been uncovered, then in the witness of her fellow disciples, then in her weeping at the loss of Jesus, then in an angelic visitation, then in conversation with a man she presumes to be the gardener, and finally, finally in being recognized by the risen Christ as he calls her Mary. All of this plays out slowly, carefully, almost ploddingly, and it must have been doubly difficult for her to make any sense of it as a foreign visitor to this strange and threatening city.

In his telling of the story, the gospel writer stretches out the interval between the event of Christ's resurrection and the time when his closest friends recognize it. Over and over again, the disciples encounter the risen Lord, but they are extremely slow to comprehend the importance of what is going on here. Mary brings the two men to the tomb, but they are like middle school boys with short attention spans. They believe something, but we aren't told what, and they

² Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship*, Orbis Books, 2000, p. 445

return home wordlessly. Mary's own concerns revolve around the body; she is also stuck in a place where she fails to completely comprehend what has happened. All she can see is that the body has been taken, and what she wants is to control the damage: "Tell me... I will take him."

Later that pattern is repeated in the disciples' encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. As readers, we know that it is the risen Lord speaking, but the insiders who presumably *should* know better find it very difficult to see Jesus. Jesus is hidden from those closest to him.

Joel Willie was desperate. Living Monrovia, Liberia, he was struggling to care for his seven children and his leaky shack seemed more like a tomb than a haven of protection. So day after day he sent out Facebook messages to strangers, "My name is Joel from Liberia" he wrote, "I need some assistance from you." Month after month no one responded.

6,500 miles away, Ben Taylor, a marketing manager in Utah, got Joel's message. He thought it was a scam and he wanted to teach the guy a lesson. So Ben wrote back with a lie. He told Joel he was in the photography business and he asked him to go around Liberia and take pretty pictures.

He never expected that Joel would do it. And then the photos started coming in and Ben realized this was a real guy living in real poverty. So he decided to really help. Together they published a booklet of Joel's photos titled with one of Joel's favorite phrases, "By D Grace of God."

Now over 5000 books have been sold. Joel has a new roof on his home, but much of the money has been reinvested in Monrovia. Joel and Ben have given five schools have new book bags and notebooks for their students. They are also granting micro loans to Joel's neighbors. And ever so slowly, what started out as a cynical response to an expected scam has become new life. And even Joel, who expected just to receive, has learned what it feels like to give.³

That is the story of resurrection. We wander in and out of the tombs of our existence and we fail to see and appreciate that we are in fact surrounded by a life-filled presence.

Jesus shows up on this Easter morning and he has nothing to prove, because all around us the realities of new life are bubbling in our midst. Almost always, we don't get it at first glance. Like a fleeting message from a complete stranger, it has a *too good to be true* quality to it. But

³ Steve Hartman, *On the Road in Liberia*, CBS Evening News, March 30, 2018

ever so slowly, it dawns on us like the sun rising over Lake Michigan, that new life can and does happen.

And at this moment, our story is merged with the gospel story of a grieving, foreign woman struggling to comprehend her surroundings and her reality. Together we begin to trace the golden thread of hope that runs through the Scriptures. As is so often the case, in the scriptural story and in our stories, God entrusts the small ones, the ones on the margins, the ones without voice, with the primary proclamations of our faith...that death will no longer hold us...Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.