

“Why Are You Weeping?”

Easter Sunday ~ April 20, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage ~ John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

¹Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

“I have seen the Lord”

Let’s be clear about this. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of Jesus’ resurrection. Christians are resurrection people. Indeed, only the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ explains the existence of Christians at all. No one has put this more plainly than the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19-20).

Some helpful background

Jesus was crucified and died on the Friday afternoon of Passover week. After his death was confirmed by the Roman soldiers, who were undoubtedly quite competent at execution, Jesus’ body was claimed by a prominent member of the Jewish Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus’ body was taken to Joseph’s family tomb where it would have been wrapped, scented and laid on a slab. The women would have prepared Jesus’ body as best they could before sundown on Friday, the commencement of the Jewish Sabbath.

The women returned very early on Sunday, after the Sabbath was over, to finish their work. As John tells us in his account, Mary, a

Jewish Burial

Sometimes the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection can be confusing because our own burial customs are so different from those in Jesus’ day.

Jews in Jesus’ day practiced a two-stage burial. After death, the body would be prepared and laid on a slab in a family tomb, usually a cave of some sort. After a year or so, the family would collect the bones from the decomposed body and place them in an ossuary, a bone box, measuring roughly two feet by one foot by one foot. The bone box would then be stored in the tomb with the bone boxes of other deceased family members.

You may recall news accounts of a Jewish bone box discovered last fall labeled, “James, brother of Jesus, son of Joseph.”

woman from Magdala, arrived and found that the tomb had been opened. She evidently believed, and naturally so, that someone had opened the tomb and made off with Jesus' body. After running to get help, she sat outside the empty tomb and wept. Why? Simply because she believed that someone had stolen the body of her beloved Jesus.

Resurrected Messiah?

Often, Christians wonder why Mary and the other disciples didn't "get it." Didn't they know that Jesus must rise from the dead? Hadn't he told them as much? In v.8 of his account, John reminds us that they did not yet understand. Frankly, it would have been odd if they had. Jesus and all his disciples were devout Jews. For any first-century Jew, the Messiah was God's returning king who would usher in God's kingdom, doing so in power and might and wonder and glory, for all the world to see. Thus, even though Peter had confessed to Jesus that, yes, Jesus was the Messiah (Matt 16:16), Peter was completely bewildered and terrified when Jesus was arrested and tried. Peter, and everyone else in Jerusalem, knew what the Romans did to would-be messiahs. The Romans crucified them in a most public demonstration of the fate that awaited anyone who challenged the authority of Rome. Here is the part that is most hard for us to comprehend 2,000 years later – to any first-century Jew, the fact that Jesus ended up dead on a Roman cross meant that he was surely not the Messiah! "Resurrected Messiah" simply wasn't in the Jewish vocabulary. Little wonder then that Mary mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener (v. 15)!

Only after Jesus appeared to the disciples and more than 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) and only after the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on Pentecost did they comprehend what had happened. Only then did they grasp that the Messiah's suffering and resurrection was fully in accordance with the Jewish scriptures. It was Jesus' resurrection that led them to proclaim: yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come; not fully, but it had come. Yes, the resurrection had begun, though oddly so.¹

Resurrected or Resuscitated?

Sometimes, people mistakenly think of Jesus' resurrection as some sort of resuscitation. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a "resuscitation." Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and went on to die just like everyone else. But Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality. Jesus no longer had a "soulish" body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek) but a "Spirit-filled body" (*soma pneumatikon*, see 1 Cor 15:44).

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don't try to explain all this, they simply tell what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but seemed to be able to pass through doors! When we recite the Apostles Creed, proclaiming the "resurrection of the body," we look forward to the day when we too, like Jesus, will receive a transformed and glorified physical body.

Easter Changes Everything

Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Easter is the first great answer to that prayer. Our celebration of Easter reminds us that we and this world are God's creations and that our future is grounded in this world. Easter is good news for us and the world precisely because it is about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our hope lies not in some spiritual escape into heaven, but the restoration and renewal of God's world, "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; Rev 21:1). If we speak only of a "spiritual" resurrection, with Jesus' body left in the tomb or stolen away, Christianity becomes about nothing more than some private, other-worldly salvation. Instead, borrowing N.T. Wright's² phrase, resurrection makes us a "kingdom on earth as it is in heaven" people.

Bishop Wright puts it this way. "Let's make no bones about it: if Easter isn't good news then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame." Alleluia! Alleluia!

¹ First-century Jews expected that upon the arrival of the Messiah and God's kingdom, all God's people would be bodily resurrected – all of them, at one time. But Jesus' resurrection, accompanied by no others, meant that the resurrection had begun but was not completed. Hence, Paul describes Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" and promises that "all will be made alive in Christ . . . raised imperishable . . . in the twinkling of an eye."

² N.T. Wright is a noted New Testament historian. He was recently appointed the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. This is from an article, "Why Easter Matters," in his book, *For All God's Worth*, Eerdmann's, 1997.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 Matthew 28 Matthew's account of the resurrection and one of Jesus' appearances to his disciples</p> | <p>Day 2 Mark 16 Mark's account of the empty tomb. The shorter ending may be authentic; the longer is not. The Gospel may well have originally ended at v. 8.</p> |
| <p>Day 3 Luke 24 Luke's account including the Emmaus incident</p> | <p>Day 4 John 20 & 21 John's full account; John 21 is an epilogue appended to the rest of the Gospel</p> |
| <p>Day 5 1 Corinthians 15 Paul's great chapter on the resurrection. This will repay many close readings! This letter was written 20 years before any of the Gospels.</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

