

Why We're Christians
United Church of Broomfield
April 17, 2021

John 20:1-18 NRSV

20 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.

Easter is perhaps the only Sunday that reminds us why we're Christians — and not something else. But for early disciples, it didn't mean that at all. You see, Jesus had told them on several occasions to expect a resurrection, but Jesus might as well have been speaking another language, for all they knew.

You know how if you're in a foreign country at a restaurant and the server asks you a question, and you nod your head and say, "Si, si!" but you don't have the foggiest idea of what they're talking about? They leave and you're left bewildered and wondering, "what on earth did I order." And then they bring you a bowl of ox blood soup or something.

The disciples listen to Jesus talking about how the Son of Man must die, but then he will rise on the third day, and they stare at him wide-eyed and nod in unison and say, "Si, si." They had no idea, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" as our reading for today says.

It's sort of like that for most of us today, isn't it? We're so accustomed to hearing the same assertions, the same claims, the same story, to which we've always said, "Si, si," that we assume we faultlessly understand the real meaning of the Resurrection. But we don't.

We hear but we do not hear, just as the disciples heard but did not understand. This explains why immediately following Jesus' execution, the disciples decided to go back to what they were really good at doing: fishing — for fish, not people. We do this, too. Although we have a vague sense that Easter is important, we've heard the story before. So as soon as the Easter church service is over, we go back to making a living, making ends meet and — especially in this pandemic — making sure we're ready to face any scenario, apocalyptic or otherwise.

So, the disciples on that Easter morning were sound asleep — as they were so frequently when something momentous was happening, like the Transfiguration and Jesus' dark night of the soul in Gethsemane. Some of the women followers of Jesus, however, were awake. They didn't understand Jesus' resurrection talk either, but they also felt that he deserved a good interment, and one of them, Mary Magdalene, headed for Jesus' tomb "while it was still dark."

"While it was still dark" means Mary left for the tomb before first light or dawn. Today, April 17, sunrise in Jerusalem was not until 6:09 a.m. local time. First light is at least 30 minutes prior to sunrise, so perhaps Mary headed for the garden tomb about 5 a.m. The question is: "Why?" Why did Mary Magdalene get up "while it was still dark"? The men had no intention of setting their alarms for 5 a.m. They had no desire to visit the tomb at all. Anointing the body, taking care of the graveclothes and so on, well, this was women's work. And Jesus was dead. No rush. Why get up in the dark dead of night to visit the tomb of a dead man? Besides, tomorrow they were headed north, and soon would be on the Sea of Tiberius hoping to catch a boatload of tilapia.

Actually, our text does not tell us why Mary crawled out of bed at such an early hour to make her way to a cemetery. The Bible just says that she did. She probably had not thought this out too rationally (for instance, after arriving at the tomb, how was she going to roll back the stone to get inside?). She likely didn't know what she was going to do when she arrived. She just had to go back, perhaps to grieve, to cry ... to anoint the body if possible and to process everything that had happened. Perhaps she couldn't sleep because of all those horrific sounds and images of the crucifixion. Think how you might feel witnessing a bloody and tortuous execution of someone. AND...this wasn't just anyone, this was the execution of the man who had cast demons out of her, the man she had supported financially and with whom she had traveled for two to three years, and the bloody scenes were still flashing through her brain.

Honestly, she probably got up in the dark because she was in the dark. She was lost, afraid - clueless. She was at that point in her life like many of us sometimes, when she just didn't know how all the pieces of her life would come together again. She was completely in the dark as to how she could have misjudged this man-god so badly! Perhaps she was a fool.

Of course, the disciples were in the dark as well. But they were asleep. Mary could not sleep. Somehow, she recognized her despair and despondency — her profound disappointment, perhaps. She was beginning to think that her "faith has been in vain." So, in verse one, Mary is literally and metaphorically in the dark. The idea that Jesus might be alive did not cross her mind. She gets up and goes back to the scene, which is precisely where we are today.

We are at the scene. Perhaps, we too, feel that we are in the dark. We don't understand. We don't believe. We have a feeling of being played the fool. Again, Easter Sunday is the one Sunday of the year that reminds us why we are Christians and not just souls without hope. We're in the dark. Call it the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of unbelief, the darkness of indifference, the darkness of despair. It's still darkness, and we're in it.

But dawn is coming.

Mary made it to the tomb in the dark. And then the first crack of light appeared. She saw that the stone had been rolled away! This is startling, because with her own eyes she had seen Joseph of Arimathea roll the stone to a dead stop in front of the tomb. This is amazing! God raised Jesus from the dead at some point during the night! How fantastic, yet subtly understated! Mary, however, had a different conclusion: the body was gone, and she had no idea who took the body and no notion as to its present whereabouts. Had she been able to call 911 she would have. Had she been able to send a text to Peter and John, she would have done so. Had she been able to host a Zoom meeting to discuss the situation with the disciples, she would have done so. Instead, she did the only thing she could: she made a beeline for the one man who for all his faults she knew to be a man of action: Peter. He would know what to do.

Thus, Mary of Magdala became the first “apostle” in that she was the first person to proclaim that Jesus wasn’t where he was supposed to be — which was so typical of Jesus. He had that reputation you know of not doing what he was supposed to do or being where he was supposed to be. Like when Lazarus died, and his sisters, Mary and Martha, could not find Jesus, and blamed him for not being with them. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” By the time Jesus finally showed up, his friend had been dead for four days.

Anyway, Mary Magdalene announced to Peter and the other disciple that treachery was afoot, unaware that it was not human treachery but divine shenanigans that accounted for Jesus’ mysterious disappearance. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb to confirm with their own eyes what Mary had told them. Mary was right. Little did they know that this discovery would be the hinge point in their lives; that nothing would thereafter be the same. They still did not comprehend that an amazing act of God was in play here. But dawn was breaking, and sometimes that is how all of us come to the truth or how we approach change or a new paradigm. Our understanding evolves, the door of discernment opens slowly, the aperture widens almost imperceptibly until at some point we’re standing in the full light of day.

The disciples and the women were abuzz. They were coming to the light, it wasn’t instantaneous. Perhaps we laugh and smile at their shock and astonishment. But we shouldn’t be so smug. We’ve known the Easter story for years. Easter is no surprise to us, but it was a seismic shock to Mary, Peter, and the other disciple. For Peter and the other disciple, they only needed to see the empty tomb and graveclothes. For Mary, she **SAW** Jesus and spoke with him and still struggled to understand instantly. Then there was Thomas, another disciple, who refused to believe until he touched Jesus’ physical body and wound. So, we must be patient and understanding...with them, ourselves and others. This was the first Easter, and it came as a total shock — to everyone.

Unfortunately, today’s Bible reading from the Gospel of John concludes when the truth is still dawning. The reading leaves us in semi-darkness or half-light. But we know that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were reunited in the garden. And we know the rest of the story as well:

That Jesus appeared to the disciples on more than one occasion.

That this event completely radicalized the disciples.

That the disciples, later known as the apostles, were willing to die defending their eyewitness testimony.

That from the empty tomb shone a light so brilliant that it continues to shine, even after 20 centuries.

That this particular Sunday became a hinge-point in history.

Yes, this is the one Sunday of the year when we remember why we are Christians, why we are people of faith, why we live the way of Jesus — a life of love, mercy, grace, purpose and meaning.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! AMEN