

Sermon: Easter A, 24 April 2011
Christ Church Riverdale, Bronx, NY
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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. 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 (seeking?)" 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.

A woman I'll call Diane was every parent's worst fear. By her own account she grew up in a good and loving home. There were family outings, birthday celebrations, softball, dance classes and even church. But for some reason Diane never felt quite right, and somewhere in high school things started to go wrong: alcohol, drugs, stealing, staying out late. This put the family deeper and deeper in crisis--trying to reach out to Diane, while also struggling to maintain the family's life and values. Counseling, rehab, tough love, tears and prayers—the more Diane's parents reached out to her, the more she rebelled and responded with abuse. Finally, she ran away, to a life she'd rather not talk about. It was her mid-to-late twenties before healing and reconciliation began. Diane said, "At first, I felt my parents' love was unnecessary. It was smothering. Then eventually, as things got worse, I began to feel unlovable. I think I resented my parents most because if I was unlovable I could do what I wanted and it would not matter. But as long as I suspected I was loved I wasn't free 'to do my thing.' So I needed to destroy their love in order for me to be free." "But," she said, "they never stopped loving me. Even when I got arrested and they refused to bail me out of jail, I could see the pain of love in their eyes. Now I realize how much I have needed their love; that it was probably their love and prayers that kept me alive all those years. But when I look back on those years what amazes me most of all is that my worst could not destroy their love for me."¹

¹ This story is told by (now the Rt. Rev.) Nathan Baxter. <http://day1.org/905->

The story of Jesus' death and resurrection could be the story of Diane writ large. Authorities who wanted to be free to do their own thing without challenge did their best to destroy the love of God made human, nailing Jesus to a cross. And now in the darkness of the early dawn, Mary Magdalene comes to see all that is left of that love, buried in a tomb sealed by a stone. Now since you and I have heard the story all our lives and know how it turns out, it can be easy to skip over the early stages and focus on how Jesus appears to Mary, calling her by name. But let's look at how the story gets there—the stages along the way that lead to that magnificent scene of recognition and rejoicing.

When Mary Magdalene comes to Jesus' tomb, it was dark, and in John's Gospel, light and darkness aren't just about the time of day, they're about theology. When Judas leaves the Last Supper in order to betray Jesus, the very next sentence tells us, "And it was dark." Apparently it's still dark early that Easter morning when Mary sees that the tomb has been disturbed, the stone rolled away. Dark enough to send her running to Peter and John the disciple Jesus loved: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb . . ." Peter and John's sprint to the tomb has mystified Christians for centuries. Some commentators have read back into it a kind of competition between different branches of the early church, while others have explained it as simply as that John must've been younger than Peter and so able to out run him. (One church father said it was because Peter was married that he couldn't run as fast as John!)

But to me what's more important is what happens when Peter and John get to the tomb. Inside they see Jesus' graveclothes—the linen wrappings lying there, with the head cloth rolled up by itself John believed, we read, while the gospel says nothing about Peter's reaction (and Peter is not one to hold back!). Then Peter and John both go home. By then Mary Magdalene is back and weeping in full devastation. When she finally looks inside the tomb she sees two angels, telling them what she told Peter and John—that the grave has been robbed. She's so distraught she can't even be able to recognize the risen Jesus, Thinking he's the gardener she asks him where Jesus' body is, still thinking it was taken away. That's my story and I'm stickin' to it! It's only when Jesus calls Mary by name that she recognizes him. (Dante "Bick" Caputo, dear friend of Christ Church who died recently, reminds us that you have to be careful what you say to the gardener. He loved to do his own gardening, and one day when he was working in front of his house a chauffeured limo drove by slowly and then stopped. The woman in back complimented him on his work and asked if he'd come work for her. "No thanks," he said, "I like the deal I have here; I even get to sleep with the lady of the house!")

Among Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and John the disciple Jesus loved, they respond in three different ways that first Easter morning. New York's own Barbara Lundblad has put it this way:

Three disciples. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything. One assumed the body had been taken away and is surprised into resurrection at the sound of her own name. . . . In each of these we find ourselves at one time or another. . . . John leaves room for us—for one who sees and believes, another who sees and

leaves uncertain, another who needs to hear her own name.”²

It’s understandable that three different people, with different backgrounds and their own experiences of Jesus would respond to the news of the empty tomb in three different ways. It’s understandable, and it’s also great news for us. How many different backgrounds do we have sitting in the church here this morning? There’s more than one way to come to believe that Jesus is raised from the dead,

No matter how much we try like Diane to destroy the love of her parents, whenever we human beings tried--and try—to destroy the steadfast love of God . . . Fuhgeddaboudit! We are invited to join the journey of Peter and John, who scramble to the tomb and see it empty, with burial clothes neatly folded, coming to believe at our own pace. We are invited to join the journey of Diane, who finally came to trust and appreciate the love of her parents. And we are invited to join the journey of Mary Magdalene, who starts the story by seeing a stone and finishes it by saying, “I have seen the Lord!”

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²“Folded questions,” *Festival of Homiletics*, presented at “Got Sermon,” Union Theological Seminary 14 April 2011.