

March 31, 2024

Do You Want to Know a Secret

Easter Sunday at Shepherd's Grace Church

John 20:1-18

20Early 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.

Isaiah 25: 6-9

⁶On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is

cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

On this Easter Sunday it is fitting that we hear from the Prophet Issiah. His word is almost eternal. His writing spreads across more than 300 years! Today, he tells us what we have been wanting to hear, he tells of the promise of the Lord's gift of eternal life.

You know, in the Seder Supper, we sing a song called Dieyanoo. The English translation of this Hebrew word is, "it would have been enough." The trajectory of the song is to let us know that if God had only created the heavens and the earth it would have been enough. If God had only given us life it would have been enough. If God had only provided food and clothing it would have been enough. If God had only freed us from slavery it would have been enough. If God had only parted the red sea, it would have been enough.

The song keeps going reminding us of all the incredible gifts God has given us and that any one of them would have been enough for us to worship God. Still, God gave them all and still more! What we hear in Isaiah this morning is the ultimate more! God gives us eternal life! He didn't have to, and we certainly don't deserve it, but God loves us that much!

Oh, and get this...God makes that promise more than 500 years before the birth of Christ! So, for hundreds of years, God has been planning and orchestrating events so that they could all come together in exactly the right way. God's works in this way give a whole new perspective to the phrase, "In the fullness of time."

This morning, I want to give an even greater emphasis. On this Easter morning when we hear about God accomplishing the incredible, I want to tell you that God's plan for this eternal life was orchestrated even before the beginning of time.

It has always been God's plan for us as humans to have eternal life. In fact, I believe that if God had God's way, Adam and Eve would have lived forever, but alas...God did not have God's way, at least not in the way we think of it. You see, God created in us an image and likeness that could not be

overlooked. Because we are created in God's own image, and in God's own likeness, we have this thing called free will.

Because we have free will, we get to choose. Adam and Eve made a bad choice and from that moment on, God has had to break into time to steer the history of God's world toward the completion of God's ultimate will.

In the fullness of time, God made it possible for the Messiah to come and accomplish the plan which God put in place even before the beginning of time. You see, God knew that Adam and Eve would disobey so, from conception, there was a plan to send God's own son to redeem, heal and forgive.

All of those things were accomplished during Jesus' life; most in the last few hours of His life, the time when He was on the cross. There was just one final event that had to be accomplished. You see, "God so loved the world that he gave His only son that whoever believed in Him would have eternal life."

God had to instill belief. That was the role resurrection played in God's plan. After three days, Jesus was raised from the dead. As the Scripture says, on the morning of that day, the first day of the week, Mary went to the tomb. In the other gospels, Mary went with others so that they might anoint the body. Not in John's gospel. In John's gospel, Mary went alone. Perhaps she went to weep and mourn, perhaps just to confirm for herself what she had seen with her own eyes; that Jesus was really dead.

When she reached the tomb, she discovered that the stone was already rolled back. Notice her next action! Instead of going on to the tomb and looking inside, Mary hurried off to find the two disciples whom she believed were closest to Jesus. **MARY NEVER LOOKED IN THE TOMB!**

Mary never looked inside. Instead she made an assumption, perhaps based on her grief, perhaps based on the political climate of the day, perhaps based on the criminal element known to be around the area.

In certainly could have been out of grief that Mary made the assumption she made. Grief stricken; she could have assumed that others had already been to the tomb. Maybe she thought Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had taken the body. They were largely an unknown element of the followers of Jesus. Their fear of the leaders of the Jews might have led them to take proactive steps to ensure the safety of Jesus' body. In her current emotional state, maybe Mary had "missed the memo" that someone from her group was going to move the body.

The concern regarding the leaders of the Jews was real. In the week before His crucifixion, He had cast out the money changers and done damage to the

sanctuary of the temple. Many people were following Jesus to the great concern of Jewish leadership. The Pharisees were openly condemning him. For them to take his body and desecrate it was not out of the question.

Finally, the idea of grave robbers was a common concern in Jesus' time. People were desperate for anything they could find to sell or trade. With the Romans levying high taxes of the Hebrew people, most people did not have enough money to take care of their families. They resorted to desperate measures to care for those whom they loved.

Still, I think there was a fourth reason Mary did not look. Mary was alone. I don't mean she was by herself, though this is the only gospel where she is by herself. I mean she was alone in her faith. She wanted her reality to be different. She wanted to believe in the promises of Jesus that he would arise after three days, but in this moment, she stood alone.

Could it be true? Could He really be alive? Could I really believe? How many of us, when we have faced uncertainties in our lives have asked these kinds of questions? When we face illness and sickness, do we pray without hesitation, or do we pray with a sense of fear and skepticism? When we face financial difficulty do we completely trust that God will provide for our every need or are we afraid to look at the reality of our situation and believe that there is a life after our current difficulty? In the midst of these difficulties do we not often feel like we are alone? Do we not often feel like there is simply no one else who can understand the situation we are in?

Mary, standing all alone in the face of an uncertain reality sought out help. She turned to those who were of a like mind as her. She turned to those with whom she had made this journey, a journey that took them all the way to the cross. Not knowing the events of the past several hours and days, Mary turned to those with whom she shared a relationship based on faith!

She hurriedly sought out those whom she knew she could trust. She turned to her friends, to those who had heard the good news she had heard. She turned to the church. She turned to the church for help. She turned to the church who could understand. She turned to the church who would get involved. She turned to the church.

You know the song, "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All of God's people, all around the world, yes we're the church together." We are all the church, and we are all invited to be church together for each other and first, for God! Mary, instead of confronting her concerns alone, confronted them by turning to those whom she knew were faithful as she was.

Mary went hurriedly to find Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. When she found them, they went without hesitation. I believe there is a lesson here for the people of the church. First, we have to be present and available when others come to seek us out. We do not have the luxury of sleeping in our staying home or simply deciding that we will worship by ourselves today. We must recognize that our worship is done together because there may be others present who need the gifts that only we bring.

Second, we must come without worry or hesitation about our own situation. God will put the people of the church in front of you who can guide and help you if you are willing to be put in front of those in the church who need the gifts that only you have. We cannot be people of faith if we are unwilling to trust that God will guide us to and through the circumstances by which we are confronted.

When Mary found Peter and the other disciple, she did not know of all the trial Peter had suffered over the past couple of days. She may or may not have known that Jesus had told Peter he would deny him. (John 13) She likely did not know that Peter had in fact denied Jesus just as Jesus had prophesied.

Mary would have had no idea what Peter's state of mind was. She could not have known how distraught he was. When she approached, she would not have known that he had likely not had sleep or nourishment for the past few days on account of his actions and the effect they would have had on his physical or mental condition.

When Mary found the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, she would have known of his new responsibilities. She was standing at the foot of the cross with him when Jesus assigned him a new relationship with Mary, Jesus' mother. She would not have known how those responsibilities affected his state of mind. She would not have known how he was dealing with them. She certainly would not have known how the events of Good Friday left him feeling about Peter.

Still, she did know that these were men of faith who had that faith strengthened together in their journey with Jesus. She knew that they would have some insight into her concern. Because they were followers of Jesus, she trusted them to guide her in her next action, and she sought them out.

When she found these two, she told them of her concern, and they did not immediately say, "He is Risen!" They did not start to sing songs or dance for Joy as we do on this Easter morning. No. That first Easter morning was a morning of confusion and great concern. The reality they experienced was one of loss and concern over the fact that someone had somehow rolled the stone

away. Remember that just a few verses from now, John will p us that they did not as yet understand that Jesus must be raised from the dead.

When they heard Mary's concern, they did not question her about what she had seen. They knew Mary and they trusted that she would not have come to them if she did not have a legitimate concern. They did not know that she did not look into the tomb. A person of faith, one with whom they had journeyed, had come to them and told them the body of Jesus was missing.

We can learn a lot from this exchange. When people of faith come to us with concerns, the first response we should have is to listen to them and then walk with them through their experience. Just this morning, I had a conversation with one of our church elders. I told him the furnace was not coming on. He did not question me or ask what I had done to determine that the furnace was not coming on. Instead, he went to the furnace and looked at the equipment. When he saw, he believed. (I am getting a little ahead of myself here, but it will all tie in in a second.) He looked inside the equipment and realized at once where the problem was coming from and that we could not fix it on a Sunday morning. (That is why it is only 62 degrees in the sanctuary this morning—lol!)

When we listen to people and believe that they have an issue, even if it seems an unlikely issue to us, we validate our equality in faith. When we see people of faith who look different from us, men or women, black or white, any other kind of differences, if we share their concerns, we can immediately establish a common ground for dialogue.

That is exactly what Peter and the other disciple did. They did not think to themselves, Mary is only a woman. They did not think that she had come from Magdala, a place of perversion. Instead, they responded to her need and they listened to her. They also did not say to her, I am hurting or I am in need of healing. They put her needs ahead of their own and they responded as best they could.

The two started out to the tomb. They were running side by side. Then the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. I do not know why the other disciple was faster. I am sure there are many of you who are faster runners than I am. I also know that physical and mental ailments can affect speed on a given day. In the end, I do not think it matters who reaches the source of the issue first, what does matter is that the issue be addressed.

Peter and the other disciple were not thinking about resurrection. Remember as scripture tells us this morning, "They did not yet understand." When the "other disciple" reached the tomb first, he bent down and looked inside. He did not go inside. When Peter arrived, he bent down and looked inside and he

went inside. The "Other Disciple" followed. They saw the linen burial cloths lying on the floor with the other garment, the one that covered Jesus' head folded neatly and lying in another place.

Peter could make no sense of the events that had taken place in the tomb. Perhaps he could make no sense because he was still mourning his own actions in Jesus' last hours. Perhaps he could not get past the feeling that he had abandoned and denied Messiah just as Jesus told him he would. We do not know what kept Peter from making the connection on that first day of the week when the sun was just beginning to dawn. What we do know is that he did not make the connection in that moment. (If you are wondering what scripture says about this connection, make sure you find next week's message for the reason I believe it points to)

After Peter enters, the other disciple enters the tomb. He looks around, sees the same things Peter sees, and as John tells us, "he believes!" What was it that the other disciple believed because of what he saw?

I think to understand that, you have to understand and be willing to accept who the other disciple is. For me, scripture is very clear in this understanding. We are introduced to the "Other disciple, the one whom Jesus loves," in chapter 11 of John's gospel. Mary and Martha send a note to Jesus saying that his friend, "The One whom he loves," has become ill. The man's name is Lazarus.

Lazarus dies before Jesus arrives at his hometown and Jesus raises him from the dead. He is referred to as Lazarus on only one other occasion in John's gospel. In chapter 12, Jesus is at a dinner given in his honor and Lazarus is sitting with the other people at the table. After that, the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loves is referred to in Chapter 13 and the one who questions Jesus about who will betray Him. He is referenced in Chapter 19 while standing at the foot of the cross with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus. In this morning's reading, he is referred to in this way, and again in chapter 21.

Many scholars have confirmed this understanding and upon close reading, I do not think any of you would be surprised that you come to believe the one who entered the tomb on that day with Peter was in fact Lazarus. I know that over the years, the common speculation about the "Other Disciple" is that he is the evangelist who is writing the message. While writing strategies in the first century were different from those today, the logic of story telling simply would not stretch so far as to agree with this theory.

I know many are going to be uncomfortable with this revelation, particularly on Easter Sunday morning, but I ask you to just carefully consider the evidence I have laid out for you. The "Other disciple" entered the tomb, looked around and saw the same things that Peter had seen. He examined the same evidence and he "believed!"

Why would this other disciple believe when Peter, himself, did not? The answer is because he had been in a similar location before. He heard the Lord call him out. He left behind the comforts of heaven and returned because the Lord needed him present, present in fact for this very moment, for the profession of faith that makes it possible for us to sing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" The event is called a prolepsis. It is a scientific term that involves quantum mechanics and the assumption of other dimensions, other than those we are able to observe in this world. Eternity is one of those dimensions. Lazarus was able to believe because he had been there and Jesus broke through the dimension of time to call him back so he could see and believe in this instance.

The two men left the tomb and went their separate ways. We do not hear of them again until chapter 21, but their paths take opposite directions. Still, in this moment, they offer for us the courage to overcome betrayal and the knowledge to accept resurrection. Their presence there for Mary Magdlene invites all that is missing in this moment to confirm the truth.

Mary is standing outside the tomb weeping while the two are inside. When they leave, she kneels down and looks inside. We anticipate that she will see exactly what the others have seen. Instead, Peter and the other disciple, in their willingness to believe her, have opened her eyes and ours to another perspective. Mary sees two angels.

Were they there when Peter and the other disciple were in the tomb? We do not know. Perhaps they were, perhaps, as I choose to believe, they entered time from eternity in this moment to prepare a message only intended for Mary.

As she wept, they tried to comfort her, but it was not until another appeared that she could find comfort. When the supposed gardener spoke to her, she could not see who it was. When He called her name, she was able to recognize that it was Jesus! Jesus was the only one who was able to comfort Mary, and even he could only provide comfort when He called her by name.

In Isaiah 43: 1-7, we are reminded that the Lord prepares his people for times of great trial. He says to the people of Israel, do not be afraid when you pass through fire and water for I am with you. I have called you by name, and you are mine. It is not until Jesus calls Mary by name that she recognizes him and

is claimed by him. She is his. Just as in John 10, we are told that Jesus is the shepherd and his sheep know him and they follow him because he calls them by name.

Jesus knows Mary and calls her by name and she is his. Isaiah goes on to say that God had paid an incredible ransom for God's people because they are precious in His sight and honored and adored and God loves them. Today, we are reminded that God has paid an even greater ransom than we could have ever imagined. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that who so ever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3: 16)

Jesus calls Mary by name just as he calls all of us by name today. He has paid with his own blood for all of us so that we might know Easter and so that we might say, Christ is risen!, and respond, Christ is risen indeed!

Easter begins in darkness. Gradually the events of the day become illuminated by ever increasing light. In the brightness of light we can see the Sunrise!

I hope you have been preparing for this incredible secret and that you too will listen today as God calls you by name. Do you want to know a secret? Amen!