

Easter Sunday Study Notes - John 20:1-18

In the beginning . . . In the new beginning . . .

John presents us with the narrative that lies at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised. We watch as Mary, Peter, and an unnamed disciple discover that Jesus' tomb is now empty; the outward and visible sign that Jesus has conquered death and a new creation has begun. And we are witnesses to the moment when Mary meets her risen Lord. Her grief turns to joy and she brings to us the good news that has been proclaimed throughout the ages, "I have seen the Lord."

This portion of John's gospel is a play that unfolds in three distinctive acts; a story about people searching, about sadness and fear, about action, surprise, and joy. And it is a story that takes us full circle back to the opening of the gospel.

The scene opens on a solitary figure walking through the darkness. Mary Magdalene has broken through her fear in order to tend to the body of her teacher and friend. All gospel accounts of this moment vary on some points. But what is consistent is the day and that it is Mary Magdalene who is the first to go to the tomb.

When Mary finds that the stone has been removed she jumps to conclusions. Her perception of what has happened is that someone has entered and stolen the body. But the author does not tell us if she entered or even looked in the tomb. Did she really know that the body of Jesus was not there? (How often do we jump to conclusions about God's actions in our lives?) Nevertheless, she runs back to tell Peter what she believes has happened.

Act two shifts to the experiences of Peter and the unnamed disciple intriguingly identified only as "the one whom Jesus loved." Over the years there have been many suggestions as to whom these two might represent: Jewish and Gentile Christians, Petrine and Johannine Christians. Could it be that the beloved disciple is unnamed because, as one biblical scholar has suggested, this person is to represent us?

Like Mary they run. The unnamed disciple, perhaps younger, arrives first. Since he could be the junior partner, he waits until the senior partner, Peter, arrives. He (or could it be she) allows Peter to be the first to enter. Inside, Peter discovers that the tomb is, indeed, empty. And unlike the four-day dead Lazarus, who stumbled out of his tomb hindered by his burial wrappings (John 11:44), the cloths are still in the tomb. The details are intriguing. The author describes the placement of the wrappings, but also notes that the cloth that had covered Jesus' head has been rolled up and put in another part of the tomb. We should note that the tomb is truly empty when Peter and then the other disciple enter. There is no angel; no heavenly messenger.

John tells us that the beloved disciple "saw and believed." But what did he believe? It could be that he believed Mary was correct — someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Or did he believe what Jesus had said the night of their last meal together, that Jesus had "conquered the world!" (John 16:33)

Act two ends as the two go home. There are no shouts of joy, no celebration. The emptiness of the tomb does not seem yet to have made a difference. (How many people in your congregation will not be feeling joy, hope, or certainty this Easter morning?)

The focus returns to Mary standing outside of the tomb. Weeping, she does, this time, enter the tomb. It would seem that neither Peter nor the disciple have offered any words of comfort or encouragement to Mary. But Mary does not find an empty tomb. While the body of Jesus is not there, like the synoptic gospel accounts, there are two angels. In response to their almost ridiculous question, (of course she should be weeping,) Mary repeats her interpretation of the situation; the theft of her friend's body.

Finally she repeats the question once again to a man she believes is the gardener. This may not be as ridiculous an understanding as it seems. It could be that John is giving us clues on how we might understand what has happened. Two things drive us back to the beginning of John's gospel encouraging us to view this, not as the end of the story, but a new beginning.

First, in the opening of John's gospel, Jesus' first words are a question directed at the disciples of John the Baptizer. "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38) And here, in this beginning, this new creation, Jesus asks Mary the very same question, "Whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15) A new ministry is beginning, a new story. Is Jesus asking the same question of us this Easter morning? What are we looking for? It was when Jesus called her by name that Mary recognized her beloved Rabbouni. Is Jesus calling our name? And when John's disciples called out to this Rabbi, he invited them to "Come and see" (John 1:39). Are we being called to see the new things that God is doing in our lives and in our world?

Second, unlike the synoptic gospels that begin at dawn, John's tale begins in the dark, the absence of light. This is the writer who, at the opening of his gospel took us not to a stable, but to the very opening of creation, "In the beginning." Could it be that John is taking us back, once more, to that primordial darkness when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). The author is echoing Paul's declaration that in the death and resurrection of Jesus we are experiencing a new creation, "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And where are we? In a garden. Without knowing it, Mary has correctly identified Jesus as the gardener who is bringing a new world, a new life, and a new creation into being, as he had done before:

"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3-5).

In the first creation story God drove Eve and Adam out of the garden. But in this new creation Jesus sends Mary out of the garden rejoicing. She is sent out to tell everyone the darkness has not overcome the Word made flesh who had lived among us. She had seen her Rabbi, and she now understood that she has seen "the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) "I have seen the Lord." (John 20:18) Her message declares to us the new beginning that God has prepared for all of us.