

There are two things you will find in all the Easter stories. First, the tomb was empty and second, Mary Magdalene appears in all four gospels. Mary would be the first person to meet the Resurrected Christ. She will be the first “evangelist” for Christ.

I have a friend who does youth group ski trips and often he calls me and checks in with me. During our conversation, he usually ends up asking me if I am preaching that week. When I say, “I am,” he then proceeds to ask me “What are you going to preach on this week?” If it is a Monday, “I would say, “I don’t know, it’s only Monday!” If it is a Friday, I would say, “I still don’t know, but I am very confident I will be preaching on God.” Most ministers have the same problem, except this week. We are all very confident we will be preaching on the Resurrection.

However, the problem we have is which version of the Resurrection story will we preach? All four gospels have their own account. Each tell a different story, with different characters and a different sequence of events.

Depending on which story you read, you will find earthquakes, one or two angels. You will find women – but one, two or even three different women? Sometimes Peter is there and sometimes he isn’t. Most of the time the stone is already rolled away, but in Matthew an angel comes and rolls away the stone right in front of them. In the gospel of Mark, the women are so scared they take off running. In fact, Mark ends his gospel saying they were so afraid they told no one. We are left to wonder how anybody found out about it.

There are plenty of skeptics who say these contradictory stories are a sign that the Resurrection is not true. But the reality is just the opposite. The fact that the stories are so different is the best proof of their authenticity. If the accounts were tidy and consistent, you could argue that someone sat down around the year 35 A.D. got out a quill and made them up. Finding them so unique, suggests there is something else going on here that transcends the rational way our intellect works. And, then there is the matter of the women.

In all of the gospels, the first witnesses to the Resurrection are women. In the first century, if you were making up a story, you wouldn't use women to prove it. They were not considered reliable. If you wanted to create an Easter story which you wanted people to believe, you would only use men and you would make sure the stories were all the same. But, they aren't.

Put the four Easter stories under one tent and they make up a three-ring circus. Different characters moving in and out of the garden. Stones being rolled away. People running. Angels talking. The women and disciples are frightened, skeptical, and confused. In other words, they sound exactly like you would expect them to sound if they were true. If someone had been raised from the dead, the people who witnessed it would be so utterly bewildered, they would hear and see it in their own way – which is exactly what happened.

The one consistency in the Easter stories is the sense of surprise—no one expected to find the tomb empty, and Jesus gone. None of them made their way to the tomb that first Easter morning expecting anything but sorrow and silence.

Today we are going to hear Mary's story in John. Of all the women, other than his mother, Mary Magdalene was the closest to Jesus. According to Luke's gospel, Jesus had freed her from seven demons. Some speculate Mary was the woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. Mary loved Jesus. And now her friend had died. He didn't just die. He was executed. He was mocked and abused then hung on a cross between two criminals. The way he died, only made the loss more heart-breaking.

Let us listen for the Word of God, for this is God's Word to each of us today.

¹Now on the first day of the week Mary Mag'dalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away 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 Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they

went toward the tomb. ⁴ They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, ⁷ and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths 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 know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴ Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” 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, “Rab-bo’ni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” ¹⁸ Mary Mag’dalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

It’s three days later. She goes alone. The other disciples were terrified to join her and for good reason: If the Romans would kill Jesus in such a brutal way, what would they do to his followers? No wonder they stayed out of sight, behind locked doors. The fact Mary would risk going alone, is just one more sign of her devotion to him.

Unlike the other gospel versions, John, doesn’t say why Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. There is nothing here about anointing the body or laying flowers at the grave. She just went there because that is where he was. All she wanted was to stay near him and this was

the only place she knew to go. Isn't this something we do too? We visit the graves of the people we love. We visit to remember. That's what she does here.

So, John opens Mary's Story, by saying she made her way to tomb before sunrise. John makes a point of telling us that she came when it was still dark. He meant to tell us the time of day, but maybe he was also telling us her state of mind. Anyone in grief, knows this darkness. It hardly matters if the birds are singing and sun is shining that morning. Mary's way was shrouded with sadness.

And then to her shock and dismay she sees it - the stone covering the opening had been rolled back. Jesus was gone. She had only one thought. She didn't start singing Easter hymns. The possibility of a Resurrection never occurred to her. She ran back to find the disciples, to tell them, someone had stolen the body. But, only two of them, Peter and the other disciple, bother to check it out.

When they got there, they saw the stone was rolled back. They stepped in and had a look. Mary was right: no body. All that's left are the linens they wrapped him up in. Then, John says, "they believed," but it doesn't say what they believed? Maybe all they believed is that Mary had been telling the truth. She told them Jesus was gone, and sure enough, she was telling the truth: the body was gone. There's nothing here about them believing in the Resurrection. They didn't break into hymns of joy either. All we know is that after looking in and not seeing him, they simply turn and go home.

It seems kind of cold to me, really. I don't know what they could've done, but I think at least staying to comfort their friend Mary, might have been better than turning and walking away. Grief does strange things to people.

After they leave, Mary stays and once again, she is all alone. She stays where he is or at least where he was. Then, with tear-filled eyes, she looks into the tomb again. Maybe hoping this time, he will be there.

It's like when we lose our car keys. We keep looking in the same place a dozen times thinking they will miraculously appear, right? This time

when she looks, she doesn't see just linen strewn about like clothes on our kid's bedroom floor, she sees two angels. They ask her why is crying? She tells them. "They have taken my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him." Not only is her friend dead but now someone has stolen the body. She can't even give him a decent burial.

I noticed something here. You would think a conversation with two angels would be enough to convince her to have hope - if not in the Resurrection, at least hope that everything will be ok, but the angels don't seem to convince her of anything. I find this comforting even if Mary doesn't. I know there have been times when I have had things happen that should convince me, yet I am either still doubtful or not sure what I was convinced of.

But, still, she stays. She stays weeping until another man shows up. She turns around, looks right at him, but in her grief, she can't see its Jesus standing right there in front of her.

And then she has an experience. I don't think words can describe it. Jesus says her name, "Mary." In an intensely personal moment, she is startled – like waking up from a nightmare. She opens her eyes, and she sees, and she knows, something indescribable, something impossible, unthinkable has happened. He is risen. Jesus is alive.

The Presbyterian writer, Ann Lamott once said, **"When God is going to do something wonderful, God always starts with a hardship. When God is going to do something amazing, God starts with an impossibility."**

Mary is now in an amazing world. Old certainties of life and death are no longer certain. When Mary runs back to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," it's the first of many appearances, where many others would hear Jesus calling them by name too. Then it dawned on all of them. If Jesus is raised from the dead, then everything is different, more different than they ever imagined. God is doing a new thing, an astonishing thing. This is what Jesus meant about the Kingdom of God. In the Resurrection, the promised new creation is happening. History will be forever different, and it has been ever since.

This is the whole reason Paul could say that now, “In Christ, the things we were sure of are no longer permanent. In Christ, there is no east or west or north or south. In Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female.” All our human preconceptions and even the convictions of our long-held beliefs, are not safe from the liberating hands of God.

Good Friday, the Crusades, and other atrocities demonstrated just how far humanity will go down the wrong path. We won’t just enslave people for 300+ years, and won’t just send millions to the gas chambers, we will even crucify the Son of God. Yet, the Resurrection shows us, that even when we do our worst, it will not stop God for doing God’s best. God can redeem our deepest evils and God can save us from our most desperate failures.

Once Mary realizes it’s Jesus, she tries to do what anyone of us would do: Grab onto him. But, Jesus says no, “Do not hold me.” He doesn’t want us to hold him where we are, he wants to take us where he is going. Where he is going, things like justice and compassion and human dignity are not just the idle dreams of the naïve and hopelessly optimistic, but the realities upon which the universe rests. Better for us to let go of Jesus, allow him to take us where he wants us to go, then to try and hold him where we are.

Where does he want us to go? He wants us to do what Mary did. She stayed near him. That is why we are here this morning. We are doing what Mary did. Maybe we came here in the dark, like Mary did - overshadowed by sorrow, fear, or covered in doubt. We may only be here because someone dragged us here. But it doesn’t matter, really, how we come.

If we are willing to stay long enough and come back often enough, we just might, like Mary, hear Jesus call our name. And then, all those sure and certain things – the sadness, the limitations, our tiny faith, or our large fears, will burn away like dew in the morning.

He promises, if we stay long enough, like Mary did, he will find us. If we stay near him – going where he wants us to go and doing what he

wants us to do, he will whisper our name. We can't hold onto him, but we can follow him, and if we follow him, he will take us to places more joyful and more hopeful than our imaginations dare to believe. That is the Easter promise. The tomb is empty. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.