

John 20:1-18

“From Despair to Joy”

The Resurrection of Our Lord

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Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Jesus rose not in mythology. He rose not in spirit, not in a mass hallucination, not in the distraught and disturbed minds of His disciples, and not in pious hope. Jesus rose! He took back His crucified and dead body. He took up His body from death and the grave.

He even left His linen grave cloths behind. It is as if He took off His bed sheets and folded them. After all, grave cloths are for the dead, not for the living. The tomb is empty, because He no longer has any use for it. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

But on that great resurrection day morning, there wasn't joy. Instead, there was despair, doubt, and uncertainty.

As much as Jesus taught His disciples that He must be delivered into the hands of evil men, die, and rise to life on the third day, they still were slow to believe. It seemed that each time Jesus mentioned this, they all got caught up on the aspect of His death.

On Good Friday, they all witnessed their Lord suffer and later die nailed to a cross. All hope was lost.

So, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She wasn't alone as the other Gospels tell. She, along with Joanna and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they could anoint the body of Jesus. Along the way, they asked each other, ***“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”*** (Mark 16:3).

Despite Jesus proclaiming He would rise on the third day, none of those who were closest to Him had that expectation. But as the women arrived, they noticed that something was very wrong. The stone that once sealed the tomb was rolled away and the Roman guards were missing.

The women look inside the tomb and Jesus' body is missing. All that remains are the expensive burial cloths neatly folded and placed by themselves.

Jesus had left behind clues, but Mary Magdalene's first reaction was that of panic, despair, and uneasiness. What should have been clues to attest the Lord's resurrection, served as evidence against the Lord's resurrection. So, she immediately ran into Jerusalem to find Peter and John. Upon arrival, they too, were greatly influenced by Mary's words: ***"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!"*** (John 20:2).

So, Peter and John run to the tomb. They look in, and confirm to Mary, "You're right. He is not here." Well, what big help they were. This she knew already. Then not knowing what else to do, Peter and John went back to Jerusalem. But Mary Magdalene remained. She did not know what to do. She did not know where to go. She did not know where to turn. So, she just stood there crying.

If she could only find the dead Christ, she would be satisfied. She longs to see Jesus. She was so thankful to Him. Jesus had driven seven demons out of her, and she could not forget His kindness. She only wanted to greet Him and thank Him one last time.

But this one last time was taken away from her. "Oh, they really hated Him," she thought. "They hated Him so much that they stole His body! Now, they are grave robbers!"

She believed that in the middle of the night either the Romans or the Jewish authorities stole His body and buried Him somewhere else. How will she ever find Him again?

But there in the tomb are clues. Really, what grave robber would leave expensive linen cloths and fold them up neatly? There were no signs of haste. No signs of disarray. Whoever was responsible for this was careful, orderly, and unhurried. Who would just steal a body and leave expensive linen behind?

Alone and distraught, Mary remains weeping outside the empty tomb. You can just imagine here intense sobbing. On Friday, she witnessed the horror of her Lord hanging gruesomely upon the cross. She had seen the Romans take His limp body from the wood, and heard the horrid sound as they pulled the nails from the wood and the bone. Jesus was dead. She had no doubt of that. As awful Friday was, Sunday morning is starting off far worse. His body was missing.

But for some reason, she wanted to take another look inside. Could it be out of hope in seeing her dear Lord's dead body miraculously re-appear? Maybe a chance to search for clues as to who could have stolen His body?

But as Mary steps into the tomb, the tomb is no longer empty. In her grief, she doesn't appear to be shocked in seeing two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. Maybe she thinks she is daydreaming. Surely, this day so far has been an out-of-body experience for her. Showing their concern for Mary, the angels say to her, ***“Woman, why are you weeping?”*** (John 20:13).

In distress, she replies, ***“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him”*** (John 20:13b).

The magnitude of Mary's grief shows itself when a conversation with angels does not even faze her. She doesn't see their joy. But Mary turns around. Maybe she turned as the angels looked behind her. But she turns around. A man is standing there. Mary thought: “Could this be the gardener?” Hope is rising in her heart. “Maybe he knows something?!”

***“Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away”*** (John 20:15).

His response: ***“Mary.”*** She immediately knew. Was it her tears that blinded Mary's eyes that morning? Was it the grief in her heart that made all the world seem to move in slow motion? Everything changed when Jesus called her by name: ***“Mary.”***

***“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”*** (John 20:27), Jesus had said. Although she had not recognized Him before, at the sound of her name, Mary's heart pounded, she caught her breath, and she moved the hair from her face and stared in awe. Joy then rose like a flood.

She turned and said to Him, ***“Rabboni! (which means teacher)”*** (John 20:16b).

I'm sure she immediately jumped into His arms. Beyond hope, beyond her wildest dreams, there Jesus stood. He was not a ghost. He was not a spirit. He was no illusion. It was Him! This was her Jesus with the wounds to prove it, but still shining in glory.

All morning Mary desired to be with Jesus. Now that she had Him back, she clung to Him. But, what about you? What would you have done that first Easter morning? Would you have given up all hope? Mary clung to the hope of finding His body. Do you always desire to cling to Jesus?

So often, instead of clinging to Jesus, we cling to false gods – money, government, celebrities, or even yourself. Instead of coming to the Divine Service to be with fellow Christians and receive God’s grace that increases our faith, we make excuses. Instead of reading God’s Word, we find ourselves caught in the affairs of this fallen world. Instead of following the Triune God, we find ourselves following the fallen world and its upside-down values.

But as Mary clung to Jesus, she realized that without Him she had nothing, but with Him, she has everything. Knowing this, Jesus says to her, ***“Go and tell my brothers”*** (John 20:17).

Up to this moment, the disciples think that Jesus was dead, and they cannot believe that He has risen from the dead. Despite their unbelief, Jesus still calls them His brothers. There is nothing lacking in Him; the only lack is ours. Still, Jesus calls His doubting disciples, His brothers. And guess what? Despite our lack of faith, no matter what we may think, say, or do, Jesus still loves you, too, and He calls you His brother or His sister.

When all hope is lost in the world, Jesus still serves us His sure and certain hope because Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Had Jesus remained dead, all hope would be lost. But He did not remain dead. Since He died and rose again, by faith in Christ, you, too, will also rise to life immortal. Until that day, cling to your crucified and risen Lord Jesus and repent and confess your sins to Him, for in Him, your sin is forgiven, your conscience is cleansed, your guilt is taken away, your shame is covered, your devil is crushed, your fears are banished. In Christ alone, we are given the joy of eternal life with Him!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**