

Death is Defeated!

Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and I don't know where they have put Him!" (20:1,2)

Peter and John have a foot-race to the tomb which John points out that he won, and they notice some things have changed. The linen wrappings which would have covered Jesus body are still lying there, but the cloth they had wrapped around His head was folded up and lying to the side. Something clicked, and they realized that Jesus had risen, that that's what the Scriptures had promised from long ago and that they had now witnessed the fulfilment of God's promise. And they went home.

Now, Mary has gone back to the tomb, overtaken with grief, despairing that the body of her friend and teacher has been taken.

Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels sitting at the head and foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. "Why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put Him."

She glanced over her shoulder and saw someone standing behind her. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize Him. "Why are you crying?" Jesus asked her.

"Who are you looking for?"

She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will go and get Him."

"Mary!" Jesus said.

She turned toward Him and exclaimed, "Teacher!"

"Don't cling to Me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find My brothers and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father, My God and your God."

Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" (20:11-18)

That's the joy of resurrection Sunday - from abject grief, waves of deep sadness, to the excitement of meeting the risen Jesus. Mary was standing outside the tomb crying and moments later she is clinging to Jesus, overwhelmed that He was alive and standing right in front of her. The amazing encounter that Mary had with Jesus was not just amazing because she could see Him alive again, but, in the following weeks and months, would have told her again and again that death itself had been defeated and was no longer to be feared. Darrell Johnson puts it this way in the most recent issue of *Light Magazine*:

Death has met its match. The great enemy of humanity has been defeated.

Jesus of Nazareth walked right into the face of death, let death throw at Him all it

had, and death lost! Jesus robbed the grave of its finality. Shout it from the mountaintops: death is defeated!
Death, therefore, does not have the last word anymore. Death only gets the second-to-the-last word. In relationship with the risen Jesus, the last word is life, eternal life, life that does not end. Yes, we will still pass through the grave. But that will not be the end. It will be the beginning of life without end . . .
We, therefore, no longer need to fear death. All fear is rooted in the fear of death. That fear holds humanity captive, often keeping us from doing what we know to be the right thing to do, and often causing us to do what we know to be the wrong thing to do. We fear the consequences, we fear death. But Easter guts that fear.

One of the things that I have found personally to be impacting my thinking through this series on John's Gospel is the concept of "zoe" of life that never ends. This was Jesus' gift to many people. Remember the return trip to Cana and the official from Capernaum who came to see Jesus there and ask Him to keep his son from dying. Jesus gave him more than he asked for; He said, "Your son will have zoe! Your son will have life that goes on beyond the grave."

So, why is Jesus' resurrection different from the raising of Lazarus or the widow of Nain's son, or Jairus' daughter? Because in each of those cases the person was brought back from the grave, returned to the life they had known before, and each one of them would go on to live their lives and then die. Jesus wasn't brought back from the grave, but He went through death to the other side. He wasn't pulled back for a few months or years, but He went through with the unconquerable life, the zoe life, that never ends. While each of the people who He raised from death would face death again later, Jesus' defeat of death would be ultimate; He would never die again. He ascended to heaven, returned to His Father, alive forever. This is the great victory over sin - remember how when sin came into the world in Genesis 3 it brought death with it? - well, this sacrifice that brought forgiveness leads to this resurrection that brings life and Jesus, in one weekend, has conquered sin and death. This is the victory that changes the world, where we no longer feel bound by guilt for sin, nor by the fear of death. "Easter guts that fear".

I've been trying to imagine what it was like for Mary to come to the tomb and find it empty. She was expecting to find Him lying in that tomb. There was no doubt in her mind that He would be there. The challenge she thought she would face would be how to roll this huge stone out of the way so she could get inside. She was not expecting an empty tomb. There is one line that she repeats three times and it helps us understand what she was going through:

"I don't know where they have put Him."

The third time, it's phrased a little differently:

"Tell me where you have put Him."

In each case, the big issue for Mary is that she can't find Jesus' body. She has lost her one connection to the person who had so changed her life, delivering her from the

seven demonic beings that controlled her existence. Without that body, there's no way for her to honour Him, to thank Him, to show Him the respect and appreciation that she wants to give Him. It's an empty place for Mary - she's lost connection with her Lord and Teacher. It was hard enough to watch Him die, but now this loss is added. And so she weeps. And as she weeps she bends over and looks into the tomb again, and there she sees two angels seated at each end of the place where Jesus' body had been laid.

Do you remember another place in Scripture where there are two angels at either end of a place where God was said to be? On top of the Ark of the Covenant. At each end of the lid of the Ark were angels, cherubim. And do you know what the space between them was called? The mercy seat. This picture that Mary sees in the tomb is the fulfilment of a very ancient prophetic picture that God described in detail when He gave Moses instructions on how to build the Ark of the Covenant. Because here, in the space where Jesus' crucified body had been laid, between the two angels, is the new and eternal mercy seat of God. Forgiveness flows from the place of God's self-sacrifice. Mercy is known through the suffering of the servant Son. The angels ask the question, "Why are you crying?" And Mary gives the answer, "They've taken Him away and I don't know where they've put Him."

What takes her out of this place of desperate loss? It was Jesus saying her name. She had glanced over her shoulder and vaguely saw someone standing behind her, but there was no recognition. Even when He asked her why she was crying and who she was looking for, she didn't recognize the risen Jesus. She supposed He was the gardener and so she went after the information she wanted directly, "If you have taken Him away, tell me where you have put Him and I'll go get Him." Her constant question, "Where is He?"

But when He said her name, she turned toward Him and then she finally recognized Him. Try to imagine the emotional shock that would have overwhelmed Mary at that moment. She had seen Him die, she had just been grieving the loss of His dead body, and now, suddenly, He's there in front of her, speaking her name, asking her about her need.

Nearly 2000 years have passed from that moment and we still have a hard time grasping how amazing this victory over death really was ... and is! Most people, I think, hope that there's something good on the other side of death - Jesus shows us how good it is. All the joy that Mary felt at that moment is the joy we will experience when we graduate from this earth-bound life to the eternal life in the presence of the good, good Father. All the regret, disappointment and struggle that characterize our lives on this earth will be replaced by the wonder of being accepted by the King of kings and being welcomed into His eternal Kingdom. I don't think we can imagine the fullness of that joy from our perspective here today. I don't think Mary Magdalene could have anticipated the emotions that would overtake her when she turned to see the gardener and found the original Gardener, the One known to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Here's my encouragement to you today. You were created for much, much more than the few years you spend on this earth. Life is a treasure - eternal life is a far greater treasure because it is lived in the presence of all goodness, grace and joy. The resurrection of Jesus is the door that opens us up to that possibility. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the fulfilment of God's great plan for humanity. The new life that Jesus entered into on Resurrection Sunday is the new life that all who put their hope in Him will experience on the last day. That's the day when our spirit unites with our resurrection body and we enter into the fullness of all that our Lord has planned for us.