

4-4-21  
Easter Sunrise  
John 20:1-18

## Each in Our Own Way

By my count, today marks the thirty-fifth year I have mounted a pulpit somewhere and preached on Easter. I had taught the story in Sunday School for several years before that. And, of course, I had gotten up early to see what was in the Easter basket and then dressed up in new clothes and gone to church to hear this story and then gone home to hide eggs for years before that. Most of you can tell similar stories. This is not our first time around with this story.

The amazing thing about this story, like so many other stories in Scripture, is that every time we come to them with open hearts and minds, we find something in them that we need to hear.

The thing that strikes me about this story this year is how the different people involved in it all react to what they see and hear in their own ways. That got me to thinking about the variety of ways we all respond to this story and its power in our lives.

You know the story. What you probably know is some combination of at least four different ways it gets told in Scripture. Each of the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, do something a little different with this story. For whatever reason, we always read John's account at this early service. John's story is pretty simple: Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone in his telling. She finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. She runs to Peter and John, two of the three disciples who always seemed to be around when something important happened. Those two disciples ran to see for themselves what had happened. Then they went back home. Mary was left alone again and encountered the Risen Jesus after they left. Once she

was convinced it was, in fact, Jesus she had seen, she ran and told the others, “I have seen the Lord!”

Pretty simple story. Pretty amazing impact.

There are several characters in this story as John tells it, and all of them react to what they see and hear in different ways. The whole world has turned upside down for all of them in the past few days. These who had been with Jesus for the past few years had seen and heard things they weren't sure what to do with. Whatever hope they had had died on Friday. He had stirred things in all of them that made them think he was going to do something special. The government that oppressed them. The religious system that promised things it couldn't deliver. The society that maintained expectations for men and women, insiders and outsiders, adults and children, young people and old—he had talked about all those things and how he thought they ought to be different. When he talked about it, it made sense. But all those powers and others seemed to come crashing in on him and them, and all the change they had hoped for didn't look as if it were going to happen. The Temple leaders and the Roman officials, who hated and distrusted each other, had conspired to silence him. The culture that he had come to redeem decided to get rid of him.

It's in the midst of all that pain and confusion that Mary comes to the tomb that morning. Even though her heart was broken, there were things to be done, and it looked as if they had fallen to her to do. Sabbath laws were among the most important for Jews in that day, and Jesus had died late enough on Friday that they couldn't finish what was required to bury him. When sundown came, it had to be left, and now that it was almost a new day and a new week on Sunday morning, somebody had to go finish that unpleasant work. There were not funeral directors or embalmers in those days. Bodies were wrapped in cloth, and someone had to place spices and fragrant herbs among those cloths to keep the odor down as that body decomposed. Since most people were buried above ground, that process started pretty quickly. It would already be at work by the time Mary got

there, and she knew it. Still, someone had to do it, and it looked as if it would be Mary. Good and faithful Mary. There had been stories about Mary, not all of them flattering. I'm sure there was talk about her and other women who traveled around with Jesus and the disciples. It doesn't bother a bunch of free-thinking Presbyterians to count Mary as one of the disciples, but that would never have done in her day. Women were women and men were men, and that seemed to be one of the things Jesus wanted to change, but you see how that turned out. We'll never know for sure whether Mary Magdalene was really a prostitute or if that story grew out of her hanging around men when that wasn't acceptable. Jesus and the disciples depended on people like Mary for their support. Those guys had all left their jobs and Jesus doesn't ever appear to have had one, so people like Mary, however she had made her money, fed and supported them. Some, like Mary, travelled with them. Whatever Mary was or may have been, you could count on her when things needed to be done. So here she is at the tomb on Easter morning.

When she finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, she knew she had to have help. No one would put much stock in any story she told. She was a woman, and a woman with a past. So she ran to get Peter and John. They had been with Jesus through it all. They'd know what to do.

If the women among us wonder why they weren't with Mary to help her to begin with, they were afraid. Crucifixion is not an easy way to die, and they had seen Jesus and those other two guys die on Friday afternoon. They didn't know who might be next. So Peter and John, and the rest of the disciples thought it best to lay low for a while. Now that the Sabbath was over, who knew who might be next on the hit list.

But Mary knew where they were. Maybe she had been with them and had come here from there. When she found them, they were amazed at what she told them and lit out immediately to see for themselves what had happened. Their trek turned into a footrace, each of them trying to get there ahead of the other. If you look back over the stories we know about these guys, this

shouldn't surprise us. There was always competition among the disciples. We hear about most of it from these two and James, but I'm sure it was broader than that. But these two in particular had been among those who wanted places of honor in whatever power base Jesus set up. If he overthrew the government, they wanted to be in the new order. If he toppled the Temple leadership, they had eyes on positions there, too. So it mattered to both of them to be able to say, "I got there first!" Of course, Mary beat them both, but that's a story for another time.

It was John who got there first, but he was so overcome by what he saw there that he hung back and didn't go in. It was a tomb after all. Peter wasn't far behind, and you know Peter was never one to hang back, so he charged right into the tomb. When he wasn't struck down, John decided to follow him, and they both saw where the body had been, but it was gone. The grave cloths were there, but Jesus was not! They remembered those times Jesus had told them he would die, but would return. And now they began to believe. But they needed time to think this through, so they went back home where it was safe.

That leaves Mary alone again. You know how the story unfolded. She saw two angels first, and that didn't scare her away, and then she saw Jesus. When she finally figured out who he was, she heard him tell her to go and tell the others. And she did. She ran to where the disciples were and said, "I have seen the Lord!"

I think it's important for us to hear that each of these people experienced this event in a way that was helpful to them. This is not a one-size-fits-all story. Resurrection is about new life, not forcing us to adapt it to what we already knew.

Each one of us comes to this story over and over again in our lives. Every time we gather for worship, we gather to worship the Risen Christ. And that means something different to each of us, dependent on where we are in our lives and what God has revealed to us.

There are always people like Mary among us, people who just need to do what needs to be done. Thanks be to God for

them. They are not second-class disciples because they are doers instead of thinkers. We need doers. We need people who don't have to think everything to death. Just do what needs to be done. I told those who were part of our Zoom Bible study on Wednesday about an article I read this week that I plan to share with the Session when I get time. It was written by a minister about things the Church has learned from the pandemic. One of the most important things she mentioned was our ability to do things quickly. We Presbyterians are not known for that. Decently and in order? That's us. And that usually takes a while—and lots of meetings. But when the virus hit and we discovered that we wouldn't be able to worship in person for a while, we had to learn to think on the fly. I remember the first time Beth said something to me about broadcasting worship on Facebook, I thought, "Sure, in McComb, Mississippi. At J. J. White!" But it didn't take a week for me to make my way to their back porch where Beth used her phone to send our abbreviated worship experience to people everywhere. We were able to beef up the Wi-Fi signal in the sanctuary and when Billie Nance and her sisters were looking for a way honor their late father, Tommy Ratcliff had a customer who knew about streaming cameras they were using in another church, and I thought again, "Yeah, right. At J. J. White!" But it wasn't long before we had one, and then we identified five people who knew how to use it, and we have been online every Sunday since then. The Session said go for it, even before they knew what it was, and our ministry has expanded in ways we would not have if we had been left to our own understanding. I still don't have a Facebook page, or want one, but we're out there every Sunday. I don't know everyone who watches. But I've connected with many who leave us comments or get in touch in other ways. Our own people and others who have been isolated by the virus have worshiped in ways they could not have if someone had not been willing to take that bull by the horns and get it done. Thanks be to God for the Marys among us who do what needs to be done!

Of course, there are Johns and Peters among us, too. People like John who need a little time to let it sink in. Who need to think about it, pray about it, and we are all stronger for their reflection. If we thought Mary was a git 'er done kind of person, watch out for the Peters among us. Simon Peter was never one to hold back. Jesus had to restrain him several times, but you know how his story turned out, too. He became one of the primary proclaimers of the Gospel as the community of Christ began to venture out from its fear and to spread Good News to all the world.

None of these are the absolute right way to respond to the Resurrection. And one of them are wrong. Wherever you are on your journey of faith this morning, this story speaks to your heart and your mind and your hands and your feet and every other way that represents a way to respond to it. I heard this story so many times and so many ways that I finally became convinced that I was supposed to be one of the ones who tells it. And after thirty-five years of doing that, I'm still at it, and the story still isn't all told. That call may come to some among us here. But there are many other calls and many ways to respond to them. We will always need people to get things done. But we also need people to think things through before we jump. We need choir members when we get ready to sing again. We always need people to study together and to teach. We need caregivers and planners and leaders and followers. And all those people come from this story. Each of us can find our own way to tell the world, "I have seen the Lord!" And the world needs to know we have because the world is still full of people who have not or who have and need to again.

It's the same story it always has been. It's what is calls forth from us that makes the difference. And how we respond. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God! Amen.