

John 20:1-18 – April 17, 2022 (Easter)

“Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.”
This is how St John begins his account of the resurrection. And he has an interesting way of telling it. Not because of what he says, but kind of because of what he doesn't say.

He doesn't say, for example, who was with Mary Magdalene. We know from the other Gospels that she was not alone. There were at least three other women with her. But John focuses only on Mary Magdalene. Likewise, he doesn't say why they were going to the tomb. But, once again, we know from the other Gospels that they were going to prepare Jesus' body for permanent burial. Why did they need to prepare Jesus' body?

Well, you see, Jesus was crucified on a Friday, just like we remember it on Good Friday. He was nailed to a cross around noon. He hung on it, suffering for three hours, then declared, *“It is finished,”* and gave up his spirit. For an unknown length of time, he hung dead on the cross. It could have been only a few minutes. More likely an hour or two. But we're not told.

Whatever the case, the afternoon grows late and the Jewish authorities get anxious. You see, they petitioned the Romans for this execution. Which means that they're responsible for His body. And the Romans are going to want these bodies down. Because... well... they've got more people to execute.

But the Jews are in a bind. Jewish days are not reckoned from midnight to midnight, like we do. They're reckoned sundown to sundown. Which means that as soon as the sun sets, it's going to be Saturday. It's going to be the Sabbath. And not just any Sabbath: The Sabbath of Passover. And they cannot, under any circumstances, touch a dead body on such a high, holy day.

So as the afternoon grows late, they really only have one choice. They make sure Jesus is dead by stabbing a spear into his side. Then they remove the dead, naked, body from the cross, wrap it quickly in a linen sheet packed with spices donated by Nicodemus, place it in a tomb offered to them by Joseph of Arimathea. And as the sun begins to set, they leave.

No time for a funeral. No time for weeping. No time for mourning. All they can do is seal up the tomb and wait until the Sabbath is over. Wait until Sunday.

And so early Sunday morning, before the sun is even up, a group of women go out to the tomb. Their mission is to prepare Jesus' body. What does that mean? Well, among other things, they probably wanted to wash it. I mentioned during my sermon on Friday how, after being whipped and beaten and tortured with a crown of thorns and nailed to a cross, Jesus' body was so covered in blood and wounds that it was barely recognizable as a human being. The people who loved him can't leave him like that.

They probably also wanted to put perfume on it. Frankincense and myrrh, just like the magi had given to Him decades before. So that they could spend time with his remains and weep over them without the stench of decay.

They probably wanted to wrap his body properly. With clean linens and burial clothes. Give Jesus in death the kindness and love He never got in life.

They wanted to prepare His body. And in their minds it didn't matter that He wasn't alive to appreciate it. They loved Him. They were faithful to Him. They were his friends. And this was the least they could do for Him.

What they didn't know was that He was thinking the same thing about them the entire time. Imagine Jesus' body one more time. Bloody. Limp. Cold. Lifeless. Dead.

In our sinfulness, that's exactly how God sees us. We are born as spiritually dead as Jesus was physically dead that Friday afternoon. Limp. Cold. Lifeless. We are born spiritually unresponsive to everything God does for us. We look at the world and we see only the surface layers. Only the physical. Only our possessions and our needs and our desires and our flesh.

We never look past our own simple understanding. We never see God working and moving and planning beneath the surface. We never see the Laws He's set in place that keep this world held together. We never see the great good and joy that He wants for our lives. Because we're not able to. Those eyes are dead. Those eyes are blind.

And so we blunder around, offending Him with our lifestyles. And offending Him with our thoughts. And offending Him with our self-centered, self-righteous, self-serving arrogance. That never even considers whether there's a God who judges right and wrong in this world.

We are born dead. Dead in our trespasses. And God has every right to leave us in our death. Throw our souls in a tomb and forget we ever existed. But like the women who came to Jesus' tomb that morning, He loves us. He's faithful to His promises to us. He has called us his friends. And He would sacrifice anything and everything for us. Even Himself.

The women came to prepare Jesus that Sunday morning. But He came to this world to prepare them. They came to wash His body. He came to wash their souls. They came to anoint Him with the sweet perfume of incense and myrrh. He came to anoint them with the sweet incense of His Spirit. They came to clothe Him with pure white linens. He came to clothe them with His own righteousness. They came to find a dead body. He came that they might have life and have it in abundance.

They came to prepare Him. But He was there waiting for them. Waiting, specifically, as John tell us, for Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. Mary Magdalene, who had poured perfume and tears on His feet and washed them with her hair. Mary Magdalene, who alone of all the disciples seemed to know that His death was coming.

And yet, even she in all her understanding, couldn't conceive of a world without the weight of death. Without the veil of tears. Without the blindness of sin.

That's what sin does to us. It takes away our sight. It makes us see only what the devil wants us to see. It consumes our thoughts with temptation. It overwhelms our mind with fear. It hides from us God's commands, God's goodness, God's love. So that we can see only the sin in all its pleasure. Only the guilt and shame of our sin once committed. Only the penalty of sin, which is death and hell. Sin blinds us to God's Word. Sin blinds us to Jesus.

Mary was a sinner too. She looked her Lord in the face and didn't even recognize Him. But He recognized her. He was her shepherd. He called her by name. "Mary." And she came running into His arms.

You have been called by name. You were dead in your trespasses. Blinded by your sin. A lifeless corpse in a grave. But God came to prepare your spirit and your body. Not for death. But for life.

He called to you as He called to so many people in His ministry. Lazarus. Peter. Mary. He called you by name and you rose from the dead. He called you by name and, for the first time, you saw Him.

John begins his Gospel by saying, "*We have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" And then he continues his Gospel listing time after time that people see Jesus and it absolutely transforms them.

John the Baptist sees Jesus and declares, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" Philip sees Jesus and he runs to find his brother Nathanael, "We have found the one prophesied by Moses," He says, "Come and see." The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well and runs to her neighbors, "*Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.*" The Pharisees question the blind man about who healed him and he confesses with simple honesty, "*I was blind, but now I see.*"

And now Mary Magdalene, who came to the tomb blinded by grief and fear and despair. She hears the voice of Jesus. She hears her name on his lips. And she sees him.

She sees him for who he really is. She runs back to the disciples and declares, "*I have seen the Lord.*" I have seen Yahweh. I have seen the God who made the heavens and the earth. I have the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have seen the God who rescued Israel from Egypt and brought us to the Promised Land. I have seen the Lord Almighty. Because I have seen Jesus, risen from the dead.

Those women came to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body. But He came to prepare them. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to weep blind tears over Jesus' lifeless corpse. But He came to open her eyes so that she could see.

Now on the first day of the week, we came to this sanctuary early. For some of us, while it was still dark. But we didn't come here to find a dead body. We didn't come here to weep over a dead savior. We didn't come here to wallow in the blindness of our sin.

No, we came here to see the Lord. To rejoice in his resurrection. To feast upon his living body and his living blood for the forgiveness of our sins. And so receive life in his name. We came here because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.