

Pastor Lara Bhasin  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024  
John 20:1-18

*At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:*

- P** Christ is risen! Alleluia!  
**C** **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I do not normally give my sermons titles. But I have a title for this one. I am calling it “A Tale of Two Witnesses.” Today we hear from two very different witnesses who were there on Easter morning.

Our Gospel lesson this glorious Easter morning is from the Gospel of John. It is the story of the empty tomb and the first appearance of the risen Lord. The one who is telling the story is John himself. You can see where he refers to himself in the text as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” (This is not vanity, by the way. In this context, to refer to oneself in the third person is an expression of humility.) So, when John speaks of Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved running to the tomb, he means himself. He was there. He and Peter were witnesses to the Resurrection.

But if you look again at today’s text, you will see that it is a story in two parts. In part one, John and Peter are the eyewitnesses, the ones who peer into the empty tomb and know that something miraculous has transpired. And although there are two disciples, it is John telling the story, so it is John who is the first in this “Tale of Two Witnesses.” In part two, it is Mary Magdalene who will be the eyewitness, the first person to meet the resurrected Jesus face to face.

There is something we can learn from these two eyewitness accounts when we look at them side by side. There is something here to learn about faith and discipleship in times of trial. There is something in this story that should shape how we too bear witness to the miracle of Easter.

Now picture the scene in your mind. It is so early on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath, that it is still dark. Poor, distraught Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb where her beloved Jesus was buried in haste on Friday evening. She probably has not slept a wink since that awful day. She does not know what to do with herself. The other Gospel accounts suggest that perhaps she went

there, along with other women, with spices so they could finish preparing Jesus's body for burial according to Jewish custom. Maybe so, or maybe she just wanted to be close to Jesus again. She misses Him so much.

But when she arrives and sees the heavy stone door of the tomb has been rolled to one side, she is frantic. She assumes that someone has come to move Jesus; someone has tampered with His grave. She runs to fetch Peter and John. Perhaps they haven't slept either; perhaps they broke out into a run the moment they heard Mary's cries from down the path.

And so, we come to our first eyewitness account of the Easter miracle. Peter and John reach the tomb, gasping for air, and when they go in, they see that it is indeed empty. Take note of the careful details that John provides. The linen cloths are neatly arranged; the face cloth is folded up and set aside with deliberate care. These details are important to John; they mean something to him. He knows this was not a grave robbery or a hasty attempt by Pilate's soldiers or by the Jewish leaders at a coverup or some other nefarious purpose. Even though he has, at his point, not quite put two and two together and understood the full meaning of the Resurrection and its scriptural foundation, he knows that something miraculous is afoot. Referring to himself in the third person again, he says, "the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

That line, "he saw and believed," is remarkable to me. It is possible I am reading too much into these words, but to me this line says a lot about the character of John. These words suggest to me that John is a rational man. No matter how implausible the scenario before him, he trusts the evidence of his own senses. I cannot be sure what Peter was thinking, but John, it seems, is certain at least that *something* extraordinary has happened. Those humble cloths, neatly folded, are enough to renew his shattered faith. The effect on him is so electric that he and Peter turn right around and run back home. Maybe they are eager to tell the other disciples about the empty tomb. Maybe they think that there's a chance Jesus Himself will be waiting there for them.

Now John is writing all this in retrospect, many years later. Tradition says he was the youngest apostle and that he alone lived to a ripe old age, and perhaps he wrote this Gospel in the latter part of his life when the memories were no longer fresh. But let us give him the benefit of the doubt. Let's take him at his word and agree that the moment he knew the Resurrection was true was the moment he stepped down into the tomb and saw the grave cloths neatly folded. He believed the evidence of his own eyes and drew the only logical conclusion he could; Jesus is alive.

There are people of faith who are like John. God bless them. They do not struggle with belief. They look at the world God made, they read the Scriptures He inspired, and they draw the logical conclusion. There is a Creator. There is a soundness and a pattern to the universe that points to Him. What they read in the Bible of God's self-revelation makes sense to them. God's moral law and the Ten Commandments make sense to them. The story of Jesus's life and death fits into this worldview, and they are convinced by the overwhelming evidence that He rose from the dead and that He is Lord.

Perhaps if we were all so rationally inclined, faith would be easy. We would never waver in our devotion to Jesus. We would never doubt His Word or His love for us. We would not be derailed when bad things happen or thrown into turmoil by life's sorrows and disappointments. Discipleship would come naturally.

That would nice, wouldn't it? I think there probably are Christians like that. Rock steady and unflappable; for them the life of faith is smooth sailing. As I said, God bless them.

But even John knows that this is rare, I think. Maybe that is why he passes so quickly from his own eyewitness account of the empty tomb to the much more moving story of Mary Magdalene. I suspect it is Mary's story he wants us to focus on, not his own.

Mary Magdalene, let us remember, bears the noble title, bestowed by church tradition, of Apostle to the Apostles. She is the first to meet the risen Jesus and thus the first to preach the good news of the Resurrection to all the others.

But it's a kind of a strange scene we have in this morning's text. Mary finds herself again alone at the tomb. John and Peter have run off because they, or at least John, is convinced that the empty tomb is a good sign. They are probably bursting to tell the others. And yet Mary does not budge. She stands by the tomb and continues to weep. She is so crushed by grief she does not know what else to do. The empty tomb and the folded cloths are not enough to heal her broken heart.

Her sorrow and her tears, it seems, cloud her senses. Two **angels** are sitting in the tomb, and there she is, completely unfazed, as though angels are an everyday occurrence or as though she cannot even see straight for weeping. All she wants to know is where Jesus's body is laid. It seems she does not even think to ask about why the linens are so neatly folded. Then, in what might just be the most delightful moment in all of Scripture, Jesus Himself appears next to her and she mistakes Him for the gardener. The gardener! Yes, perhaps

in His risen body He is not as easy to recognize, as the Road to Emmaus story suggests, but I still maintain that she is blinded by tears.

I think she is blinded because I know that I too have been blinded at times and unable to recognize Jesus standing right there in front of me. And I am sure that many of you have had the same experience. Whether on account of grief, or temptation, or doubt, or turmoil of some kind, we so often lose sight of the Savior. The empty tomb is before us, but we cannot quite grasp its significance or enter into the joy that it bestows. Something is holding us back.

The life of faith is not always a straight path. There may be moments when we are at a loss and don't quite know what to do. We are blinded or burdened in some way and find ourselves frozen in place. Perhaps tragedy has struck and made us doubt the goodness of God. Or we are caught up in some kind of sin that is overpowering us. Or perhaps we have grown distracted and lost sight of Jesus by such slow degrees we are not even aware of what has happened.

So there stands Mary Magdalene, blinded by her tears of grief, so distraught she does not question the appearance of two angels in white sitting in the tomb, so completely unimpressed by folded linens she ignores Peter and John running off in a consternation of excitement, and then she hears it. The text reads: "Jesus said to her, *Mary*." As soon as her name falls from her dear Jesus's lips, she knows it is Him. "Rabboni," she cries! Now she too believes.

Can you imagine that moment of sorrow turning into joy? I do not think there are words that could even convey what Mary must have felt when she heard the sound of her own name uttered with such perfect love.

But what really has happened?

Mary has heard the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Remember these words of Jesus. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." (John 10:27-28)

The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name. His sheep do not know the voice of strangers, but they follow the voice of the Shepherd Who leads them out of danger, away from false and wicked shepherds who seek to harm them. The Good Shepherd lays down His very life for the sheep.

It is so easy for sheep like us to get lost. It is so easy to be led astray or to find yourself confused, wandering, or sad even as a Christian. Even though you

know about the empty tomb. Even though you have rejoiced on many an Easter morning. The life of faith is not guaranteed to be easy or trouble free.

But we have a Good Shepherd Who calls *us* by name. He called us when we were baptized. He calls to us in His Word. He calls to us daily to turn from our sins and distractions and follow Him. To get back on the path if we have strayed. To find joy in Him if we are weeping. To experience anew His love for us if we have somehow lost the sense of it. He calls us and will keep calling as many times as necessary to lead us safely home.

I believe that John is holding Mary up as our model of faith. He, John, was impressed by the empty tomb but didn't quite know how to react. Maybe that explains why he and Peter went running off without even pausing to check on Mary. Thomas, poor old doubting Thomas, whose story comes right after the lesson appointed for today, is only impressed when he gets to touch Jesus for himself and be sure that He is physically real. But Mary is attuned to the voice of her Good Shepherd. Her love for Him is so deep that even when her world is falling apart, her heart knows that it is He when He speaks her name.

Perhaps this is why it was Mary Magdalene to whom the honor was given to be the first to see the resurrected Lord, the first to be able to cry with joy, "He is risen!" She is our model of faith because she, more than any other disciple, shows us what it looks like to follow the Good Shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death into the light.

That is my prayer for us, too, this Easter morning. The risen Lord is here calling us, too, by name. Are we listening for His voice?

One witness to the Resurrection believed because he was impressed by the empty tomb, and the other believed because she was moved by love to linger at that tomb and so to be the first to hear voice of her Beloved and behold Him face to face. John is lifting up Mary as the model disciple here.

Be like Mary and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd as He calls to *you*. Be like Mary and do not let anything else in life derail you from your stubborn love for Jesus. Do not let any false shepherds lure you away or make you doubt that Jesus is Lord and that He bids you follow Him.

And if, sometimes, on your journey of faith, you find that it is hard to hear your Shepherd's voice amidst the tumult of the world, take heart and stay the course. There will come a day when you *will* hear His voice as clear as day, when your name will come ringing from His tongue, when He says to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will

set you over much; enter into the joy of your Master.” (Matthew 25:21) Until that day, let us strive to be good and faithful servants in every way as we rejoice at the empty tomb and worship our living Lord.

To this Good Shepherd, the Risen Jesus, be the glory, together with Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:*

- P** Christ is risen! Alleluia!
- C** **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**