

“Moment of Discovery”

*An Easter Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Did you know that people were making use of the oil deposits in the Caspian Sea one thousand years ago? This natural resource served medicinal and commercial purposes, but for more than 800 years, nobody would have any idea that this viscous substance could be used to power an internal combustion engine, since, of course, one had not been invented. Sometimes we might find something but not know just what it is we’ve discovered. Then we can see its true importance.

Consider the strong evidence that Viking explorers made their way to Newfoundland centuries before Columbus found himself in the Caribbean. Those intrepid northern explorers had no idea of just how large the continent on which they had planted their small settlements was. That was something to be learned by future inhabitants of North and South America, including those who arrived on these shores long before the Vikings.

These instances came to mind as I read John's account of the Resurrection. There was confusion, there was curiosity, there was mystery, but at first people were not sure of what had happened in the cave where Jesus' body had been laid after his crucifixion.

The discovery of the significance of who was no longer in the cave came in stages. First, Mary saw the stone had been rolled away from tomb's entrance. Then, the beloved disciple looked in to see that the body was gone but the linens were still there. Finally, it was Peter who ventured inside, saw what the disciple saw, and then noticed the headcloth that had been on Jesus' head was there, too, neatly folded. The three had found something, but they did not know what it signified. Mary's initial suspicion that "they" had come and taken away the body of Jesus seemed to have been confirmed. As the text tells us, the three did not yet understand what Scripture had foretold: that Jesus would be raised from the dead.

After these discoveries, the story takes a curious turn, returning to the perspective of Mary. We see that she wept before the tomb and then looked inside. Now, before we go any further, I would note that the way this is all written—the passage from verse 2, where Mary ran to Peter, to verse 10, when the disciples returned home—could have been removed from the story without seeming to change its thrust. None of this seems essential to telling Mary's story, but as we know, this is not Mary's story, nor Peter's, but it is Jesus', and we will see that including these developments is critical to the witness that is offered here. But first let us return to Mary.

Something curious occurred when she looked inside the tomb. While the disciple saw linens, and Peter saw linens and a headcloth, Mary saw two angels in white, sitting where Jesus had been! Now we all know that when angels appear in Scripture, something momentous is going to happen. And what had been true previously was no less true here.

But things here were different. Instead of telling Mary not to be afraid or announcing some divine news like that shared with the shepherds the night of Jesus' birth, they asked her why she is troubled. She replied by telling them of the absence of Jesus' body, of her fears that it had been spirited away. But rather than address her concerns, the angels gave way—to Jesus, whom she did not recognize and erroneously believed to be the gardener.

Now clearly, something important was going on here. Jesus was not one to pull pranks, to indulge in games of mistaken identity, especially with one who was grieving. So, why did Jesus appear in this manner?

Perhaps to see what she would say.

Perhaps to see what she would do.

Perhaps he did this for our benefit, so we could see faith made real.

Quite reasonably, when the unrecognized Jesus asked Mary why she was so upset, Mary replied that she would like the body of Jesus so that she may take it away.

Dedicated to him even when he was dead, Mary showed what it was to be a disciple.

And it was at that moment that Jesus revealed himself, not to the beloved disciple; not to Peter, the rock on whom he would build his church; not to his mother or the crowds or anybody else. He made himself known by saying Mary's name.

Jesus had revealed himself to Mary Magdalene, a woman of no stature in her community. Nevertheless, Jesus had entrusted her with sharing the news of his resurrection with the disciples and the wide world beyond. Recall that a woman had no legal standing to offer testimony in the ancient world; Jesus did not care. To him, it was faith that mattered, and Mary had it in abundance.

But why must Jesus first speak before Mary recognizes him? I believe this is a reminder to us that we are not the author of the story, but that it is Jesus, and God, who are behind events. And while that may make us feel less important, that was not the intent, for someone has to hear the story, someone has to respond to the news. That was Mary, then the disciples, and now you and I.

Jesus first had to teach, and to perform signs, and ultimately be crucified—but people had to respond to his good news, his mighty deeds, his selfless service. Mary did not miss a beat: Jesus spoke, she responded. What a testimony for all of us to hear and to act on.

Jesus in verse 17 entrusted her with a message: *"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."* And that was it. Nothing more. He left things in her hands. He trusted her to get the story right, to not lead people astray from the Way.

And here we come back to that passage that I said appears to be dispensable, the one about the beloved disciple and Peter. I believe that what happened with them was akin to what Mary experienced. Their discoveries inside the tomb were but a step on their journeys of understanding, one we each must undergo. Without those moments of seeing the linens, and in Peter's case, also the headcloth, who knows how they would have reacted to the incredible news shared by Mary: *I have seen the Lord.*

This magnificent, wonderful story tells us so much about the life of faith, of coming to believe, of opening our hearts and minds to God and letting him into our lives. Coming into faith is often a slow, incremental process. Yes, some people may have a conversion

experience like Paul did on the road to Damascus, but many do not. Many people need to see the truth about Jesus slowly unfolded, as if they must make themselves ready for so startling a reality.

I recently participated in a roundtable discussion exploring the resurrection with three other clergy in the New Hampshire Conference of the UCC. As we neared the time for the Zoom call, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. “There is so much going on,” I thought. “Do I really have time for this?”

And, of course, the answer was, “Yes, I do have time for this.” The conversation was inspiring and, in a dark time, a reminder of the hope that is the basis of our faith. One of the questions we addressed was whether there are times we Christians hesitate to share the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. My response was that, yes, we do, for a variety of different reasons. Some people in mainline churches have trouble believing that Jesus was literally raised from the dead, that this kind of miracle simply is not possible. But Easter is a frank rejoinder that anything is possible for the God whom we know in Jesus and who moves through our lives in the Holy Spirit.

Others may simply be uncomfortable sharing news with which other people might disagree. They do not want to impose. In those cases, I would argue, we can speak respectfully, but if we really believe our faith to be true, why on earth would we want to hide it? Being faithful does not require one to be rude! But it should involve our being honest with ourselves.

Perhaps we *need* to have this great truth revealed to us in stages; after all, this news is truly incredible, it is remarkable, and, as the old movie title had it, it is *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

But we see from this morning’s lesson that there is more to good evangelism than telling. We must share. And that involves more risk and greater possibility of failure. Conversely, the rewards are greater. How often have we seen in our lives the power of demonstrating how to do something, rather than just passing along instructions? This point was made in John’s telling of the resurrection story. People came, they explored, they experienced, then they shared.

One of the things that has always amazed me about Jesus is how much he trusted people. He did it throughout his life and ministry, counting on people like Peter and the beloved disciple and Martha and Mary. And he did that after his resurrection, when he counted on Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and billions of people, including you, including me, throughout the ages, to live the faith and share the story of our Risen Lord.

This year things are different because of the pandemic. Offices and schools are closed, people are engaging in social distancing, and it sometimes feels as if the world we knew

has gone forever. In these strange days, the idea of a church service seems like a dream. I know there are people in Lebanon and in places far away who miss being with others, who cannot imagine an Easter without other people. But I would encourage us to remember that first Sunday, when Jesus was resurrected. He appeared to one person that morning, and from there, everything changed. That, my friends, is good news. Indeed, it is *the* Good News. We may be physically separated, but we may still share the story of Jesus, and of the amazing, transformative, life-giving thing God has done in and through him.

Thanks to the faithful witness, the boundless love, of Mary Magdalene, and of Peter, and of the beloved disciple, we may confidently share the amazing news for others to discover: Jesus Christ is indeed risen today. Alleluia!