

Ben Wideman
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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. So 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and 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. They 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." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not touch 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I'm going to start with a bit of vulnerable internet search history. This week I googled, "is it important whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead?" (SLIDE) That's a healthy Easter week question, right?

As I could have predicted, the first results are pretty certain that it is, in fact, a key and central part of Christian tradition to believe in a real and physical resurrection. (SLIDE) There are references to Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he writes, "if Christ was not raised, faith is futile and preaching is useless." Other highlights suggest that the resurrection points to Jesus' divinity and power over death, as well as a necessary step for the redemption and triumph over our sins.

I clicked through a bunch of the websites that show up first in a search like this, and across the board they were in support of this traditional understanding of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Quite a few seemed to indicate that if the resurrection were not historically true or accurate, none of our Christian teachings could be trusted or believed.

There is, however, a theological perspective - mostly in mainline or progressive spaces - that talks about the resurrected Jesus as a metaphor. Folks from this line of thought point to the resurrected *Spirit* of Jesus, that his movement miraculously continued even after his human body was laid to rest. This theological persuasion points to a lack of scientific evidence that a body that has been dead for three days has the potential to actually return to life.

These folks are skeptical of the miracle, yet they hold on to Jesus and his life and teachings, insisting that there can still be something deeply meaningful and powerful even if the resurrection never really happened. (SLIDE)

I don't bring this up this morning to try and create more heretics here at UMC, or to reject hundreds of years of Christian thinking. Only to say that I'm fascinated that there are people who are still dedicated to the way of Jesus, even if the resurrection was merely symbolic.

And I bring it up to also ask ourselves this morning, what aspects of the resurrection are most essential for you?

This week I also pulled out my trusty blue English edition of Synopsis of the Four Gospels. (SLIDE) For those unfamiliar, this is a book that takes our four gospel accounts and lays them out in parallel. As you turn through its pages, you read through the life of Jesus, noting the similarities and differences. (SLIDE)

It reminds me that Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus, while Luke takes his time and first introduces Mary and Elizabeth before getting to the lineage. John begins all the way back at the beginning of time with the familiar and perplexing refrain, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." Mark seems content to skip over any suggestion that

Jesus was ever born or a child and jumps right to John the Baptist and Jesus' adult ministry.

I pulled this book off my shelf to take a look at the various tomb narratives - one of the few times where all four gospels include the same story, though with some specific differences, or at least different emphasis. Matthew's account includes a massive earthquake because an angel comes down from heaven to roll away the stone from the entrance, frightening tomb guards to death. Said Angel perches on top of the stone to make sure the reader knows who was responsible. In Mark, Luke, and John's accounts, there is shock that somehow the heavy door has already been removed, without the help of an earthquake. Mark includes an angelic figure *inside* the tomb. Luke has two of them. John's angelic figures appear after the tomb has been found empty. All four suggest fear and amazement, and all four highlight that women played a key role in discovery of the empty tomb, and in spreading the news of this strange day.

But perhaps most fascinating to me on my read-through this week, all four accounts seem to imply that those who discover the empty tomb don't initially suspect resurrection, instead they are troubled that someone or something has desecrated the grave.

Grave desecration, tampering with the deceased, or moving the body was a serious crime in Jesus' time. There is a tablet that was discovered in the region that lists this as a crime worthy of capital punishment. It was a big no-no in Roman law, but also in Jewish tradition. And so the primary concern of Jesus' followers is that not only has their leader been killed, but that a second horrific tragedy has occurred. The disappearance of the body.

(SLIDE) "Where is Jesus?" is the question on his follower's minds. There is an urgency to figure out what happened - perhaps to pay their proper respects and follow Jewish burial mourning and practices - but also perhaps because they sense that this movement, which already feels to be in shambles, no longer has a grave marked with which to remember and mourn.

John's gospel is the only account where Jesus himself shows up at the tomb, to tell Mary Magdalene not to worry. All is fine, because he's still there with her. It turns out that despite her fear and anxiety, Jesus is already present.

There is something about this telling that feels appropriate during an anxious time. When we feel the weight of the world, when tragedy follows tragedy, and the future feels hopeless, Jesus gives a little nudge, calls Mary by name, and reminds her that he is already there.

Last week I referenced my frustration with retellings and creeds that jump right from Jesus' birth to his death and resurrection, seemingly downplaying Jesus' actual life and ministry. I wonder sometimes if our need to jump from miracle to miracle forgets about the Jesus of everyday life. When we skip parts of the Jesus story, how can we ever answer the question of where Jesus actually is?

It's the same way in our lives. Our anxiety about the state of the world, combined with a need to see something miraculous happen means we often forget to ask that same question, "Where is Jesus?"

My favorite modern theologians and writers are the ones who are in tune with this question. A quick glance at my bookshelf this week reminded me of Drew Hart, (SLIDE) Messiah professor and self-described "Anablist," whose books talk about marginalized communities who find Jesus in their activism work calling for deeper justice. I was reminded of Shane Claiborne and Mike Martin's RAWTools work (SLIDE) of finding Jesus while helping victims of gun violence. I noticed former Penn State Dean, Christian Brady, his most recent book is about finding the divine amid grief, suffering, and loss. (SLIDE)

And then my eyes came to rest on Rachel Held Evans' meaningful book, *Searching for Sunday*. (SLIDE) In its pages, she reminds her readers that we find Jesus in a variety of places in our day to day lives. His resurrection is real because he keeps showing up in real time, even today.

Rachel Held Evans suggests that we find Jesus on the margins and in service: Jesus is found loving enemies and serving the poor, sick, and forgotten. (SLIDE) We find Him in tangible sacraments such as when we gather at the table, in the

breaking of bread and wine, and in community, rather than in rigid, organized systems. (SLIDE) She notes that we even find Him in the ordinary and un-glamorous present moments of our daily lives, in fact, sometimes more frequently there than in perfected, holy settings. (SLIDE) Rachel Held Evans believed the best response to "What is the gospel?" is, "Let me tell you a story," viewing Jesus as the center of a living, breathing narrative that includes all our human struggles.

And so it's in this light that I wonder again, is it important whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead? I do want this to be true. But if our faith is so fragile that only one answer will allow us to continue to *have* faith, is that overlooking where Jesus is in our world today?

Perhaps the deepest meaning of the resurrection is not the historical certainty of a single event from two thousand years ago, but the persistent reality that Jesus refuses to stay buried, either in a tomb or in the pages of history. Mary Magdalene's experience—seeing the empty grave, fearing the worst, and then having Jesus simply *show up* and call her name—serves as a powerful model for our own faith journey.

We often look for Jesus in the places we expect the big miracle to be, only to find him already standing beside us, not as a distant, resurrected deity, but as a present companion who offers us his presence and calls us by name. The resurrection story is important - not to debate scientifically or historically - but because it is the promise that hope, justice, and love cannot be extinguished. And really, every time we center ourselves in the way of Jesus—whether standing in solidarity with the marginalized, seeking justice, or simply finding grace in the mundane—we are witnessing his ongoing, living presence among us.

Last week Jonas discovered Jesus while wading in Spring Creek, (SLIDE) and that sparked an idea. What if we got a bunch more tiny Jesuses and placed them around our building for you all to find? So where is Jesus? He is here - some of you have probably already discovered one or two this morning! Almost 100 tiny plastic Jesus' that Anika and I had the pleasure of hiding earlier this week. These tiny figures are representations of something much more meaningful and

significant. Jesus is here to be found, not just in the tiny figure form, but in the thousands of little ways that Jesus continues to walk with us.

Hidden all over our building are these small reminders that Jesus is here. If you find one, feel free to hang on to it as a reminder to look for Jesus in our world. If you happen to find two - or three or four! - please share with someone else, or re-hide Jesus somewhere he can be found by someone in the future. (SLIDE)

Perhaps this Easter, let's commit to participating in the ongoing resurrection story. Let us leave the "empty tomb" of our anxieties and expectations, and instead, listen for the gentle, familiar voice that calls us away from our sadness and back into the world. Whether we believe in a real and miraculous physical resurrection, or not, may we do as Mary was also sent out, to announce that we have seen the Lord. Not necessarily in a single, miraculous vision, but in the persistent, transformative power of His love that shows up, time and time again, in our lives and in our world.

That is a Gospel worth believing, and that is the resurrection we celebrate. As we come to the table together this morning, let us hold this as we share the communion table together, a symbol of hope in a broken world.

I invite our communion servers to come to the front at this time. (SLIDE)

And friends, as we prepare to break bread together, let's join together in a confession, found here on the screen. (SLIDE)

We will read together...

Jesus, you don't always show up where we expect or in the way we expect. Once again, we feel for Mary, weeping by a tomb. In our grief, we assume that the lost is lost forever. "Tell me where to go!" we say. Tell me how I can find that piece of what was to cling to a while longer. And we don't even realize you are there— that you have been there right in front of us all along— until you speak our name. As if to say, "I'm here." As if to say, "I love you" and promise: "This is not the end."

As usual, servers will be here at the front with the communion elements, and all are welcome to come forward to receive.

And so on the night he was betrayed, Jesus invited his friends to join him at the table. Breaking bread, pouring wine. We model that today with this beautiful loaf, grape juice, and some gluten free crackers.

Come, and notice where Jesus is at this moment.

On the night he was betrayed...

As we transition into some special music from Jim, please join me in a prayer...

Risen Jesus, we thank you for this table, where life overcomes death. As we have shared this bread and drank this cup, help us notice you more in our daily lives. Fill us with your joy, heal our spirits, and send us out as witnesses to your enduring love and new creation. It is in your name that we pray, Amen.