

Resurrection Sunday 2025

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 towards 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' 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus 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." ' 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. (429)

A well-known verse from the Bible: "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This assurance of God's presence: even people who don't spend much time reading the Bible seem to know this one, if not where exactly in the Bible it is. I myself had to look it up. It's in the Gospel of Matthew, this favorite especially among small-church types, this assurance of God's presence in Jesus invoked among the faithful of no matter how small a group. "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The Gospel of John, for its part, seems to suggest that's thinking too big, that that's one too many. According to the Gospel of John, where Jesus is, is with you, in the encounter between the I and Thou.

We see it here, in the way John remembers the scene on that first day of the week, when it was still early, when it was still dark. Just Mary. Just Mary alone.

All four gospels have their way of remembering—for that's how many versions of the story we have in the Bible, four gospels. And, it should be said, there's a lot of inconsistency between the four, among all the stories each tells but no less among the versions of the story of Easter

morning, Resurrection morning. Some have two women approaching, one has three. Some have two angels in the otherwise empty tomb, and one has but one, and not even called an angel but simply a man wearing all white. Then there's this one, the one from the Gospel of John, which has no one in there at all, only the folded linen wrappings and the head cloth rolled up and off by itself, until sometime later when the two angels *are* there, but only when Mary looked to see. For prior to that she hadn't even looked, she couldn't bring herself to look. It's as if she knew, he was gone. But, turns out, she was wrong about the reason.

These inconsistencies in the gospel tellings: they always beg notice of what's consistent, what of the story is consistent across all the four renderings. Like the stubborn insistence, the stubborn stated fact, that the body wasn't there and that the stone was rolled away and that this came as a frightening disturbance to all who'd come near. And as for all who'd come near, here is another consistency, that it was always the women, the last to leave their dreadful witness of the cross, the first to arrive at the bewildering fact of the empty tomb. Whether two of them or three of them or several of them or, as here, just one of them, it is always the women.

As for this one, it's Mary Magdalene, and she is alone.

She isn't for long, of course, because when she sees the stone rolled away, she assumes something even worse has happened, not only that Jesus had been unjustly and mercilessly killed but now he's been disappeared.

And why, she might have wondered, should that be the case, that even after death he must also be disappeared? To remove all evidence of such gross injustice on the part of the joint powers of religion and empire? Or further to degrade and dehumanize the one who'd been killed, to deny indeed that he ever was at all? Or to disallow those who'd grieve his death a place for doing so—a place to grieve, this borrowed tomb, this garden tomb just now coming to flower? To grant him such place would grant him continued being, and this could inconvenience those wanted him gone.

No, of course they'd have taken him away.

No wonder the urgency, her running to tell the others, Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, saying to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." And who knows whether she has any "they" in particular in mind, or if the ones who wield the power of disappearing others are interchangeable in her mind, a vague cloud of menace, centurions in their clanking armor of uniformity and invulnerability and interchangeable inhumanity.

So strange that what the powers aim to do to their victims, in stripping them down and shaving their heads and lining them up and chaining them together, they often impose upon themselves as well, in uniform and lockstep and masked face, as if there's something so threatening about the human being, the individual, unduplicatable, irreplaceable human being: thou and thou and thou, each one unlike any that has come before or any yet to come, the shocking, unshakeable natality of us all, each of us a surprising new possibility in the world. So afraid the powers can be of the soft, plump art that is the person, made and loved and nurtured and fashioned and presented in full color and pulsing plain beauty and gentle power, insistent power that I Am and so I have full right and privilege to be.

"They have taken him and we don't know where they laid him!"

It's this news that got Peter and the other disciple on their feet now, up perhaps from their rest on the Mount of Olives just outside the city or in the upper room in the city where they'd gathered to keep the Passover. Up now, they set out toward the tomb and found it just as Mary had said. But they went in and saw what she'd but assumed, what she'd perhaps dreaded to see, that the body *was* gone.

This confirmed would have Mary alone again. The one disciple, though now believing, returned to where he'd been, while the other, Peter, might merely have been confirmed in what these last several days had seemed to insist: there's no changing anything. Everything of this world, every brutal, unjust, hopeless thing of this world will clank along, continue to roll and flatten, to conquer and claim, while the people who might have hoped otherwise will cave to cowardice, crushed to say whatever they need to say to save their skin. Like him, right? Wasn't it he himself who just the other night said around that cold fire in the palace courtyard: "I swear, I do not know the man."

Then the cock crowed.

And on it all went.

And on it all goes.

But Mary: alone, she stands in the garden, this place where it would end, this whole story ending where it also began, in a garden. Remember? Eden? One of perfect provision and shared abiding with God, one of nature cultivated to abounding fruitfulness and in-dwelling pleasure. Not a gardener myself, I can appreciate a garden as a liminal space, a threshold space, one between the rough stuff of nature and the controlled stuff of culture. A garden is equal dose wilderness and architecture, the wild and the intended.

So, in this way, Mary wasn't wrong when she mistook the Risen Christ for the gardener. There is something of gardener in Christ for the world and for each of us, we who are at our gracious best when we live as we've been made while also seeking to be ever better. The way we are and the way we're to aim to be: each of us a garden with God our Creator come with soil and seed, and Christ our Redeemer come with a way, a cultivation, a procession in time of blossom and color.

No, she wasn't wrong, she just wasn't fully right, fully seeing what there was to see, that death isn't so final a thing, that life persists beyond it, that the fear it casts as a pall over our lives, especially when used as a weapon, comes to nothing when met with truth and justice and love. Life persists. We can persist. When things get scary, when things get menacing, we can persist.

"Mary," he says, and in his saying her name she sees. She sees beyond what had frightened her and left her defeated, what of the world seemed so dreadfully to have won.

This is one of a procession of encounters. The Gospel of John is a procession of encounters, the truth of life in Jesus rarely communicated to a crowd, much more often communicated through a far more intimate exchange. John the Witness, Andrew the disciple, Nicodemus the Pharisee, the woman at the well, the man born blind, eventually Lazarus encountered in his own tomb: this is a long gospel of thick prose plump with significance yet of very few events. Not much happens in the Gospel of John. Just a few encounters—and now Mary in the garden and later this day, which will be next Sunday in church, Thomas behind locked doors: each of these sharing an encounter with Jesus, unique, unlike any other except in their depth of engagement, each particular to the person with whom Jesus would share it, each met where they were to receive what they'd need.

Seeing Jesus, believing Jesus, believing being and its persistence in the great I Am: this according to John is not a massive act, no generic thing, one-size-fits-all. There are no magic words meant for all to say, no creeds or missives or prescriptions. This comes to you. And to you. And to you.

I'll admit I haven't always favored these sorts of stories. They lend themselves to the sentimental. They lack, it seems, in political implication, the imperative that the good news of Jesus crucified and raised is to impress itself on our life together, in our politics, our lived ideals and allocation of resources in accordance with our ideals. But these stories of one-on-one encounters: they invite the common assumption that following Jesus is a matter of personal piety

and not social justice, a matter of individual salvation and not inter-dividual enacting of the reign of God in our midst.

Lately, I'm less convinced these stories fall short.

Our politics are so massive these days. There's such a gulf between what policies are enacted and how they play out as felt, a delay in what's decided and what it effects. What it *means* to dismantle USAID. What it *means* to launch a trade war, who benefits and who loses and what corruption it allows, it positively invites. What it means to disappear laborers here and students there, whether that even really happened. Because maybe it didn't. I mean, how can we know? The zone's been flooded.

The gap between the massive and the particular, between governance and the people, is a flooded swamp fertile for lies, disinformation and the utter denial of the real. And our technology isolates us from one another so the testing ground for the truth, which has always been the space between I and Thou, is an abandoned lot, a brownfield where was once a field of play, a field interplay. We do not know. We don't know what's going on. We can't know so cut off are we from the means of knowing, from the means of truth, which was and is and ever shall be wherever I and Thou encounter one another.

It came up once in a gathering of the church book club, the question of why God would come to the world through the particular. We were reading Marilynne Robinson's book *Reading Genesis* where Robinson does much with the move of God as imagined in this first book of the Bible. Because in the first few chapters God is imagined as cosmic in scope and concern, creating the world and then destroying the world and then creating it again. God is imagined tearing down towers and raising up giants.

But then the story does a most strange thing. It reduces its scope and concern to one man, one household, and not even all that great a one. Just a man, with a wife and a tent and some household gods, not even any children, not even one child. See, suddenly the God of the earth and stars, the God of the world and of all worlds, becomes the God of Abraham, the God of Sarah, eventually the God of Isaac in all his blunders and the God of Rebecca in all her disappointments. This God is to the creation as a camel's nose under a tent, wanting in and knowing that to get in you've got to get small.

But why should that be, we wondered? Why wouldn't God simply have come in power and might? Why wouldn't God always just present as to Job, which was basically to say, in summing up, "You puny thing, you couldn't possibly approach me, relate to me in all my majesty and force."

God could be sublime, that sort of grandeur that defies approach. Truly, God could have been sublime, full stop, an awesome range of mountains whose heights reach into the clouds, a fearsome depth like the cold darkness of the ocean, which though occasionally roars forth in destruction.

But, no, God according to Genesis and moreover according to the gospels rather opts for plain beauty, a 1st century Palestinian Jew to be specific, the sort of appeal that springs up and touches forth among things most familiar, most common, even small, while also strange in their newness of showing, something you've seen a million times before but only just now notice its thrumming beauty, how very alive it is.

Yes, God could have come as a totalizing force, the sort of thing that might actually cow the powers of this world, the powers and principalities that have spent the last century making attempts of their own at totalizing the real. God could have come as their equal. God could have come as the greater. Rather God comes as loving appeal. To any person who might hope to love, to any person who might hope to live, to anyone hoping to share some encounter with an Other, God comes as loving appeal.

And we wondered why.

But how else could God be God if not to come in an appeal to love, to see.

Easter Sunday is always a grand affair about a thing most small yet also utterly undoing of all we think we know. He was dead and now he's alive, and that changed everything, and that changes everything.

May that come to you as the good news it is. May it come to you as the unnerving imperative it is, that those who'd use fear to empower themselves will rather, and surprisingly, encounter a courage in you that no menace could overcome. May it simply come to you however you need the truth to come to resurrect where hope has died that it might live again and evermore.

Happy Easter, and thanks be to God.