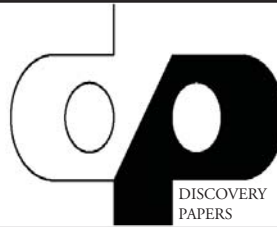




“I HAVE SEEN THE LORD”



Catalog No. 20140601
John 20:1-18
38th Message
Steve Zeisler
June 1, 2014

Our son and daughter-in-law welcomed twins into the world last Friday. We have been thinking of and praying for them (babies A and B) for months, but now we know their names—Everly Jane and Nicholas David. Though these little ones aren't aware of it yet, being known by name is a big deal as we'll see in the text before us.

We are near the end of our journey through John's gospel—having arrived now at John's account of the resurrection. In the prior study we noted that Jesus' final cry, “It is finished,” must have been received as a tragedy by his followers who heard it. By itself, the statement is ambiguous—meaning either that a life is over and done or that a mission has been accomplished. Chapter 20 opens with another ambiguity. An empty tomb may be a cause for either weeping (the work of grave robbers) or joy (the work of God).

From history's vantage point we can observe four strands that, when woven together, allowed the disciples to eventually comprehend and be transformed by the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. Strand one is an understanding of prophetic Scripture (John 20:9 & Luke 24:25-27). Strand two is physical evidence (the empty tomb, etc.). Strand three is an encounter with the risen Lord. Strand four is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. As we read the text we can see how unfolding events allow for these strands to be braided together.

John 20:1—

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

There are some important things to notice in this verse. First, John describes Mary's discovery as occurring on ‘the first day of the week,’ which of course it was. Yet, we might have expected John to give us the time stamp by counting forward from the day Jesus died—the Lord had predicted resurrection ‘on the third day’ (Luke 18:33).

John's choice of words harkens back to the original six days in which the heavens and earth were created. The empty tomb occurring ‘on the first day’ signals the beginning of a new creation. Another reference to the early chapters of Genesis might be found in the garden setting—a new humanity beginning in a new garden. Even Mary's confusion of Jesus for a gardener is suggestive. In Genesis 2:8 the Lord God is a very exalted Gardener indeed.

Second, John 20:1 observes that it was still dark as Mary Magdalene approached the tomb. This is another detail that points beyond mere descriptive information. Mary's world was dark on every level. She began her journey toward Jesus' tomb that Sunday wishing to find the decomposing body of her Lord undisturbed so that she could anoint it with spices. Her hope was to say goodbye to a corpse and perhaps to remember the tragic life that Jesus had rescued her from. The light of the world had been snuffed out—*on the first day of the week . . . it was still dark.*

The third thing we should notice in 20:1 is that Mary Magdalene was alone. We know from the other gospels that a group of women (including Mary) had arranged to anoint Jesus' body that morning. She arrived by herself before the others who came after daybreak.

A final observation is that the stone had been moved. Mary immediately drew the wrong conclusion. She could see (even in the dark) that something had happened. Perhaps she hoped it was ordinary grave robbery, because a worse alternative was that Jesus' enemies had returned after torturing and killing him and taken his body to desecrate it further. She reacted in pain to her discovery of the stone's removal without investigating more closely.

John 20:2-10—

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.”³ So Peter went out with the

other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who had 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 went back to their homes.

In this gospel Peter and John (the disciple Jesus loved) often inhabit the same scene. During the Last Supper, Peter motioned to John to try to identify who the betrayer was. Both of them were present in Annas' courtyard when Peter denied the Lord. In Galilee after the resurrection Peter asked Jesus about John's future after hearing a prediction of his own. And here we find them running together in response to Mary's news. John, the younger man, was a faster runner, and Peter, the more impetuous personality, was the first to enter the tomb.

We are told that John believed, yet without understanding. Questions remain. The orderly and folded placement of linens in the tomb refuted the notion of grave robbery. In fact, the cloths were left in place as if a body had passed right through them. The mystery before Peter and John seemed to signify great possibilities yet without clear answers. *Then the disciples went back to their homes.* Not running now—rather walking and wondering and hoping.

In the second half of John 20, Mary Magdalene plays the central role. Mary has an air of mystery that has gripped the imagination of many, both those who believe the Bible and those who don't. One observer said this about Mary Magdalene:

In one age after another, her image was re-invented from prostitute to sibyl, to mystic, to celibate nun, to passive helpmate, to feminist icon, to the matriarch of divinity's secret dynasty.

Despite the widespread speculation, we actually know very few facts about Mary. We know her hometown (Magdala) but nothing about her family. Luke records the fact that Jesus had driven seven demons from her (Luke

8:2), though there is no description of this event. It is likely that Mary's history of demonization contributed to an 'aloneness' that characterizes her, making her especially grateful to Jesus for his loving acceptance of her.

John 20:11-13—

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb . . .

Apparently she wandered back to the burial site slowly, arriving after the apostles had run to the tomb and returned to their homes.

. . . and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹²And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one 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."

When Mary spoke to Peter and John she said *They have taken away THE Lord and we don't know where they have put him.* In verse 13 she made it more personal, *They have taken away MY Lord and I don't know where he is.* At this point Mary is not just mystified, she is wracked with sorrow, grieving without hope. The angels seem surprised. *Why are you weeping?* They knew that the empty tomb was evidence of wonderful news. They also saw clearly the One who was standing behind her.

John 20:14-18—

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Jesus asks the same question the angels did. And then he asks a second question:

Whom are you seeking?

It is likely that Mary did not even realize that she was looking for a living Person rather than a lifeless body to anoint.

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 Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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.’”¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

That voice speaking her name, *Mary*, changed everything. There was no need for circumstances to be explained. I mentioned earlier that it is a privilege to embrace infant grandchildren knowing their names—indeed; real love cannot grow in anonymity. Jesus came to Mary in her sorrow and communicated deep and personal love by speaking her name.

We can make three observations about the conversation that follows Mary’s discovery of the gardener’s identity.

First, she addressed him as teacher (‘Rabboni’), which suggests that she knew herself to be his student/disciple. This is an unusual and elevated status for any woman, let alone one who had been rescued from demonization.

Second, her clinging to him suggests that she hoped to grasp the world that existed before Jesus died, but that is not possible. He must leave, and though she does not yet understand it, it is better for her and all of Jesus’ followers for him to ascend to the Father. He then makes himself present to us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus sends Mary with a message to the apostles (an apostle to the apostles) and in doing so places her in the midst of the believing community instead of on its fringes.

What application might we draw from Mary Magdalene’s experiences on the first Easter? Again, there are three ways we can connect.

First, some will find that Mary Magdalene is a kindred spirit. She was rescued from a dark place (seven demons had gone out of her). She is deeply connected to Jesus, but she is also (mostly) by herself in the biblical accounts where she appears. To quote Otis Redding in his song, *(Sittin’ on) the Dock of the Bay*, in Mary’s life, “. . . loneliness

won’t leave me alone.” For any believer whose life is similar to Mary’s, resurrection is the ultimate good news—Jesus can never be taken from the soul who loves him, even by death. And as the Risen One he places loners into genuine community with others who love him.

Second, we can take heart from the moment when Jesus spoke Mary’s name. He is the Good Shepherd who knows each of us through and through; he knows each of us by name. Human relationships wax and wane. All of us have been forgotten by someone who once seemed to know and care about us. Jesus never grows forgetful or disinterested. One day, as Mary did, we will hear the voice of Jesus call us by name, beloved children, to receive *the crown of righteousness* (2 Timothy 4:8).

Finally, we should note that for a time Mary was in Jesus’ presence without knowing it—she thought he was a gardener. We also may be unaware of the Lord’s presence and care. He still operates in disguise at times. Our perceptions are not reliable—his promises are. So, standing with Mary Magdalene, we conclude John’s description of the first Easter with this promise, *He has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’* So we can confidently say, *The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?* (Hebrews 13:5-6).