

“Places You Will NOT Find Jesus”

Acts 10: 34-43, John 20: 1-18

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It's early, very early. It doesn't matter what time it is because she couldn't sleep anyway. Could you? Would you be able to sleep if someone you loved had been brutally murdered and taken from you before you had a chance to say a proper goodbye? Grief interrupted. Mary has been waiting three days to make this journey. She is grateful to Joseph, the man from Arimathea, who took a great risk to provide them with the tomb in which to lay Jesus. They wrapped him in cloths and laid him in the tomb, but she had not yet completed the burial ritual. There were the spices. There was the tender farewell. There was the chance to weep and wonder and worry and wallow. Mary needed to go. Nothing could keep her from seeing him just one more time.

It was early, very early, sunlight just peaking over the horizon. Mary hoped that somehow she could get into the tomb with the large stone covering the entrance. She had not thought of that detail. Her only thought was to get there. What would she do if she could not move the stone? As she approached the tomb what should be delight turned to dread. The stone had already been rolled away. She assumes the worst. If the tomb is unprotected, then something awful might have happened to Jesus. Is he gone? Has someone taken him? Was the body stolen before she had a chance to tend to him? Before verifying her assumptions, she runs to tell the others that someone has taken Jesus away, he is no longer in the tomb where they left him. Grief interrupted.

The beloved disciple and Peter come immediately to see what has happened. The beloved disciple outruns the others to arrive first to the tomb. He quickly looks inside to see the cloths but no Jesus. He does no more. Simon Peter comes running up behind him full speed into the tomb. He sees the same evidence; cloths in a pile but no Jesus. Moments later, the beloved disciple reenters the tomb, assesses the situation more closely and we are told now, “He believes.” What exactly he believes we do not know. Does he believe what Jesus told them before his death that on the third day he would rise again? Does he believe that Jesus has transcended death, broken the bonds that held him to this earth, and gone on ahead of them to Jerusalem? We do not know for sure because these two disciples return to their homes without any further action.

For Mary an empty tomb and a pile of cloths are more than she can bear. She has no answers. She believes nothing. The only thing she knows for sure is that the one whom she has loved is gone, for good. There is no body. There is no grave to visit. There has been no proper burial. He was her teacher, her friend, and her healer. The world proclaimed and labeled him a criminal, a traitor, a threat and now he is gone. She can not return to her home like the others. She can not dismiss so easily what she has experienced. She can only weep. Slowly and finally through her grief she summons the courage to look one more time into the tomb. What will she do now, she wonders? What

will she tell the others? Perhaps if she takes another look she will find the answers she seeks.

As she peaks into the tomb this time, she notices two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been laid. She hears a voice say, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She does not understand. She does not recognize this man. She is confused and blinded by her grief. She wants only to find her beloved Jesus. Where have you put him? I will take care of him. Please, don’t let anything happen to him. Grief is interrupted yet again by a voice she thought she would never hear again. You know what it is like to recognize a familiar voice, one you have been longing to hear. You may first presume that your mind is playing tricks on you, but you know. This person whom she does not recognize calls her by name. “Mary,” he says, and her grief is interrupted yet again. Could this be? It can’t be true? How can this be happening? She knows it is he and declares, “Rabbouni!” Her search is over, her fear gone, her delight returns.

Her joy is short-lived. Jesus tells Mary she has work to do. She must not cling to him, but rather go tell the others what she has seen. It is true. The grave could not contain Jesus. He has risen as he said he would and he still has work to complete. There is nothing to fear. Her grief turns to delight and she lets this newly found courage empower her to continue the journey. The Easter story, after all, is not about an empty cross or an empty tomb or even an empty heart. The Easter story is about the fullness of life, the unexplained mystery of love, God’s power to transform even the darkest most painful experiences into joy.

John’s story offers us three unique perspectives into the Easter morning drama. It is the same drama, the same events, the same mystery, however everyone that arrives at the tomb that morning has a unique reaction. Each response reveals something about Jesus and something about our faith. Some of us might relate to the beloved disciple’s response. We might call him the disciple of faith. He is the first of the three witnesses to believe. John says he pokes his head into the empty tomb, sees what is there and believes. It takes him a moment, but he does not question or argue. Within moments he believes. His faith is confident and secure. He does not have to analyze the evidence like Peter or ask to see the wounds like Thomas or hear his name called like Mary. He has been a faithful disciple, walking alongside Jesus throughout his ministry and now when the time comes, he believes.

This beloved disciple is like many of you sitting here. You have a strong, unwavering faith. Through the good and bad times your faith has not faltered. You may have had moments of doubt or uncertainty. There may have been times when like psalmist you wondered if God has forsaken you. There may have been occasions when you felt as though the mystery might overwhelm you and tempting you to abandon your faith, however here you sit, steadfast like the beloved disciple.

There are others among us whose faith is like Mary’s, the disciple of love. Courageous Mary stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus suffered and died and did not retreat in fear.

She witnessed to her love for Jesus to the very end. She was the first to reach the tomb early that morning, the first to weep over Jesus' disappearance, the first to proclaim to the others that she had seen the risen Christ. Her grief is as acute as her love. Her experience of Jesus is like no other person's. Jesus welcomed her as a disciple, celebrated and honored the gifts she offered, loved her as he would anyone else. The preacher Craig Kocher says, "her weeping comes from a place of shattered dreams and a bleeding heart. Then Jesus calls her by name, holds her in his arms and restores her to the newness of life."

Many of us are like Mary. When our lives are chaotic, when no one else believes in us, when we cannot acknowledge the goodness in ourselves nor honor our own belovedness, Jesus is there. Jesus comes to us in the form of friends and colleagues or family who would never leave us to our own confusion or despair. Jesus comes in the form of teachers or mentors who would not allow us to give up. Jesus comes to the tomb where we mourn our loved ones, our losses, our failures and broken dreams. Jesus comes to us and calls us by name, "Lynne, Dick, Judy, Barbara..." Hearing our name as Mary did, we know we are not alone. We know, as Mary did, that our love has not been in vain.

Then there is Peter. We might call him the disciple of hope. He is the first to actually go into the tomb, but his response is delayed. He steps aside, waits for someone else to react, takes a second look at the evidence. An empty tomb, a stone rolled away, a pile of cloths, no body. Peter is a thinker. Kocher says, "Peter lives in a world of rationality, of cause and effect, with the laws of motion and mechanics soundly in place. Dead bodies do not disappear; somebody has to move them. Peter leaves the tomb with a pile of evidence but not yet believing. Mary has to help him make sense of this information, from the heart's perspective and not the head." The evidence is clear, but the truth is still a mystery. One plus one plus one does not equal the resurrection. This is beyond anything we can calculate. In order for us to make sense of such nonsense it will take faith, hope and a lot of love.

Peter provides every disciple with hope because we can relate to how he feels. One moment he is certain in his faith, and then he denies having ever known Jesus. He is ready to take on the world in Christ's name and then he backs down completely, unsure of anything at all. In this encounter at the tomb he seems to completely miss the point however, despite these missteps and misunderstandings, he is the one Jesus chooses to be the rock upon which the church will be built. Failed and flawed yet incredibly human, he is the disciple of hope.

Not everyone has the beloved disciple's faith, or the depth of Mary's love. However, most of us can find some hope in Peter. Have you seen the risen Christ? Has he called you by name? Will you go into the village, into this community and proclaim that death could not contain our Lord, he is risen just as he promised he would? He goes ahead of us, making a way for justice and peace and hope and joy. He goes where we are often too afraid to go, promising to be with us as we live out our faith in his name. Grief interrupted, but only for a moment. Having been blessed and sent we now declare as

Mary does, "I have seen the Lord." May it be so on this blessed Easter day, and every day! Amen