

April 4, 2010
A Whole New World
John 20:1-18

Jesus' followers get everything wrong. Mary thinks Jesus' body has been stolen. Peter sees the linen wrappings and can't work out what it's all about. The disciples don't understand the scriptures. The angels question Mary; she still thinks Jesus' body was stolen. She thinks Jesus is the gardener. Finally recognizing Jesus, she reaches out to hug him, and he tells her she can't do that. It would be hard to get many more misunderstandings into a couple of paragraphs!

This confusion makes the story all the more believable! If someone had been making it up later, they would inevitably clean up all the loose ends and make it all much neater and less embarrassing for the disciples. This is a first hand account (*"the other disciple, the one Jesus loved"* is unanimously agreed to be John, himself), full of the eye-witness detail (the little note about the neatly folded head cloth) and energy (there is more running in these few sentences than in the rest of the New Testament).

It's not surprising the disciples get it all wrong, of course! Nothing even remotely like this has ever happened before! On this Easter morning, God bursts into our world, the world of space, time and matter, the world of real history and real people and real life in a new way that has never happened before. Our minds and imaginations cannot comprehend it.

The disciples had not expected this! They had been stunned by the recent turn of events. A week ago, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. But He had not been crowned King. In fact the same crowd that had welcomed Him with loud "Hosannas" last Sunday morning was shouting "Crucify Him" by Friday morning. The disciples had seen all of their expectations, hopes, and dreams cruelly beaten, and mercilessly executed before their eyes. When Jesus' lifeless body was taken from the cross Friday evening and the huge rock thudded shut across the entrance to the tomb, their hopes died when Jesus died. It was finished. It was over.

In terror of the Jewish Inquisition, the disciples had fled to hiding places throughout the city to mourn, to grieve, and to despair. The Saturday - the Jewish Sabbath - the disciples cowered in obscure places, fearful for their lives, and certain that their dreams died with Jesus.

At Dawn ...

The story picks up early on Sunday, the first day of the week - at dawn. Dawn is the coldest time of day. It was cold temperature-wise, but imagine how cold the hearts of the women who went to the tomb must have been. They are going to a tomb sealed with a huge stone. They may have even heard that a Roman patrol has been posted on guard. The other gospel writers record that Mary Magdalene and other women were coming with spices to anoint the dead body (they hadn't had time to do that before the Sabbath began on Friday evening). It was a brave thing to

do. Anyone associated with Jesus risked their own lives. As they approach, the women wonder, *"Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"* (Mark 1:3).

When Mary gets to the tomb, the Roman guard is gone, the stone has been removed from the entrance, and the tomb was empty. Their hearts, which had been heavy and cold, get heavier and colder. The Romans - or the Jewish leaders - must have taken the body. Perhaps they would display the body for public ridicule? Even more dejected and depressed than before, Mary runs to find Peter and John. Imagine her emotional state when she finds them!

John and Peter come running. Peter is the first one to go into the empty tomb. He *"saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head; the cloth was folded by itself, separate from the linen."* The wheels turn slowly in Peter's brain.

John is the one who begins to put two and two together: if someone had stolen the body they would have taken it wrappings and all. They certainly would not have folded the cloth up. John begins to see that God was at work here. The One who had created the heavens and earth, the One had brought order out of chaos; the One who had brought light into darkness was at it again. God is bringing life into death. The world has turned a corner, winter is ending, spring is beginning, Jesus is alive again! *"He saw and believed."*

What does it all mean? Jesus is risen! He is alive! The symbols of death and decay are empty. Shells of what they had once been. With the resurrection death is robbed of its power. *"Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died ... O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... Thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:20, 55-56). Death is no longer the great unknown; it is now the doorway to eternal life with Jesus.

Even notice that little detail that the head linen is neatly folded ... the power of sin and death is hollow, AND the chaos and confusion that come with them is set to rights, too. Out of the pain, suffering, disorder, and mess that life this side of eternity brings us, Easter brings us good news of a new order, when things will be set right again. We look forward to a renewed and restored creation when everything is just as God first created it to be ... This little detail is a harbinger of greater things to come when all of creation is restored. Easter has come - and with it a whole new order of things - a whole new world.

A little later ...

Peter and John go home ... perhaps trying to make sense of it all. I'm not sure Peter gets it yet. But John does. John is probably explaining to Peter all the way - *"Remember He said this ... and that ... and this other thing ..."* But Mary stays, crying. When two strangers speak to her (we know they are angels, she apparently didn't) she tells them Jesus is dead; His body stolen; life as she knew it - and hoped it would be - is over. Angels are interesting beings in the Bible. They appear in certain situations - like when people are afraid and have given up hope. When people feel like there is no tomorrow, God's presence often comes in the most amazing ways ...

Then another person asks her again, *"Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"* She thinks it's the gardener. She wonders if he knows who took the body and where it is now.

It is when He speaks her name - He knows her name! - that she recognizes Him. What tone of voice did Jesus use? Perhaps it is a combination of greeting, consolation, invitation and gentle rebuke (Come on! Don't you know me?). She knows Him. And yet she doesn't. He's the same. But He's different. He is alive. But with a different kind of life.

Jesus knows your name. And my name. And the names of each and every person who is dear to you. Life is different when God knows your name. You are never alone.

It is significant Mary thinks Jesus is a gardener. God, bringing order out of chaos - new creation - establishes a garden. Like the empty shroud and the folded linen, this is a dramatic statement that something new is happening here! Creation is being redeemed and restored. Jesus has come to uproot the weeds and the thorns and to replace them with rich harvests and glorious flowers. Easter has come - and with it a whole new order of things - a whole new world.

Moving On

Let's look at John 20:17. Mary wants to hug Jesus! But He won't let her ... what's this all about? With Easter a whole new order of things has come. Mary's way of relating to Jesus will be different than it was before, too. He won't be travelling around Galilee and Judea any more, walking the highways and byways, sharing meals with His disciples, teaching them on hillsides, arguing with the Pharisees. Yes, for the next few days He would be visible as He was.

But Mary - and the other disciples - would have the privilege - and the challenge - of finding a new way to relate to Jesus. It wouldn't be a physical presence - that sounds bad! They would much rather cling to Him as a physical presence through their lives. But at the same time, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will not be limited to one time, one place, or one relationship. He will be able to be present with all people everywhere all the time. This is what He had tried to teach His followers over the past few weeks (John 14-17). This is so much better! Jesus is with each one of us, always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Then Jesus tells Mary *"Go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"* So? If you had been reading the gospel through in one sitting to this point, you would notice something radical and new here ...

- Up to this point Jesus has called His followers "disciples," "servants," and even "friends." What word does Jesus use in this new order of things? *"My brothers ..."* In this new world, we are brothers and sisters of Jesus - we are family!
- Up to this point Jesus has referred to God as "the Father" and "my Father." What does Jesus say now? *'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'* In this new world, we are children of God - we are family!

Bringing it home

Easter is about the beginning of a whole new order of things. In this new age our lives are different. We see things differently. Easter gives us a glimpse into the other end of the telescope so we see our lives from the perspective of the end, the goal. This is a trick management consultants borrowed from Greek philosophers: you imagine what it's going to be like in (say) 2020, and then work back and tell yourself the steps by which you got there. Easter helps us get the end in view - we know what our ultimate future will be. It isn't that we bumble along trying to live life a little bit better until one day we end up either in a grave or some vague disembodied heaven. Our ultimate future is that we will be raised to new life in God's new world.

Easter also reminds us that life now is not about struggling to obey a whole bunch of rules the way the Jewish people used to. It's about cultivating a personal relationship with God through Jesus, in the power of the Spirit. We practise habits of heart, mind and life which form our characters. Eventually we do naturally the things which reveal our characters are developing into that of whole, wise, well-rounded human beings. If you just go with the flow of what comes naturally, you will look back in ten years, or thirty, or sixty, and shake your head and realise life is going round and round in confused circles. But if we have a goal and are consciously trying to work towards it, our characters will develop, so we actually start to want new things, to enjoy new things, to develop new habits of the heart.

We don't do it alone. We don't develop these habits all by ourselves. We do it with the help and energy of God's Spirit; and we do it in company, all of us together. After all, the most basic Christian habit is love, and you can't do love all by yourself. Christianity is a team sport. The ancient pagan virtues were designed to produce great individuals, hero-figures who would lead nations in politics and war. The Christian virtues, supremely faith, hope and love, the great signs of resurrection that well up within us, are designed to produce communities in which each individual has their own unique part to play but within a much larger whole.

The life into which you we come together today is different. This is a whole new world ... God is bringing order into chaos, hope into despair, life into death. Like the disciples we may not "get it" yet - not all of it anyway! But we're starting to understand something of what it means.

The resurrection life is life lived from the future back into the present, a life of thoughtful, discerning, habit-forming faith, hope and love. It is challenging. But Jesus is risen from the dead, and we who find ourselves caught up in that great, earth-shattering event have no choice but to learn to live, right now, already, in the light both of that event itself and of the future which it unveils. Pray; think; learn the resurrection-habits of stewardship and worship, of faith, hope and love.

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