

“Not Where You Left Him”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene feared the worst when she arrived at the tomb and found it empty. Jesus had been a controversial figure -- controversial enough to get himself killed -- but now it appeared that his enemies had stooped to a new low, by raiding his grave and desecrating his body. In panic, she ran to tell two disciples, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

How fortunate for Mary to have a tight-knit circle of fellow believers she could rely upon for support, solace, and counsel. Together, they rushed back toward the place, where just the day before yesterday the man that meant more than anything to them had been laid to rest, after hanging on a cross. Weeping, Mary took another look into the tomb, where she saw two angels, wanting to know why she seemed so upset. “She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’”

Ever feel that way? Ever find yourself wondering where Jesus went? I left him right here not long ago and now he’s gone. I think that happens to us more than we might like to admit. Jesus goes missing from our lives, and after we get over the shock of it, we feel abandoned and isolated, which causes doubt to arise in our hearts. After all, this guy is supposed to take care of us, right? So where is he?

A lot of times, Jesus seems absent when we need him most. Or perhaps more accurately, once the crisis hits, we’re more likely to notice that Jesus isn’t where we saw him last, because truth be told many of us rarely look for Jesus until the need is dire. Much of the time, we’re content to run our own agendas under our own steam. When

things go wrong, we look to Jesus, hoping for miracles, only to find that he isn't where we left him last.

We, like Mary, often blame others for his absence. “**They** have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where **they** have laid him.” Sometimes, the “they” that catch the blame are we the Church, and we bear some responsibility. We need to do better. Yet the criticisms hurled at the Church often ring hollow. If only **they** were more solicitous, more compelling, more entertaining, maybe I could have kept better track of Jesus in the first place. Sometimes, the “they” are the insidious forces of the workplace and the marketplace and our households, which consume our hours and our energy so that nothing seems leftover to keep track of Jesus.

While it is true the Church doesn't always live up to its greatest aspirations, this makes the Church human, a community of sinners seeking forgiveness, but not hypocritical. It's not hypocritical to have high standards and fail to meet them. Hypocrisy is having high standards and making no effort to meet them. Tell the next person who calls you a hypocrite for being a Christian to put that in their pipe and smoke it. It is also true that life in the modern world is demanding, occasionally overwhelming. But blaming others hardly ever helps. Blame might vent frustration and make us feel better for a while, but the problem remains: where did Jesus go?

The good news is: not far. In fact, Mary found the risen Christ near the empty tomb. She mistook him for the gardener. “Who are you looking for?” Jesus asked her, and she recognized him only when he called her by name. Who are we looking for? Will we recognize Jesus when he calls us by name? Because Jesus exited the tomb transformed. He looked different from how he did when Mary saw him last.

Jesus left the cold, dark, rocky, lifeless tomb, and was walking in the sunshine, where there was life and growth and color. Jesus went precisely where he said he would go: up and out and away from what strives to destroy; toward that which gives life. This is only natural, because Jesus is life in its fullest measure; life like none other.

This is not to say that Jesus doesn't dwell with us in our darkest despair. He comes to us in the shadows of life. However, if you are looking for Jesus, don't expect him to be where you left him last, especially if you've been away from that place for a while, because Jesus moves. Take a look at the gospels when you go home today. Read one quickly. I recommend Mark for two very good reasons. First, it's my favorite, and second, it's the shortest of the four gospels. You don't have to memorize every little detail, or suck the last grain of truth out of each verse. Read a gospel like you'd read a newspaper, except this newspaper has good news in it.

Notice how Jesus is constantly moving, from one place to another; not in a stir-crazy, peripatetic way, like we do; but with purpose to deliver a message that the Kingdom of God has arrived through him. In the gospels, Jesus never stays in the same place long. He came to move among us, so that we could learn to abide with him. And Jesus is still moving, through our hearts and our Church and our world. So why would we expect him to be where we left him last? Jesus is just too dynamic to sit on a stump until we need him next.

Besides, being a disciple means to follow. That's literally what the word disciple means, "follower." We are meant to follow Jesus, so that when we need him, he's already right there with us, because we are right there with him. Some people expect Jesus to follow them, but that's not how it works. He will come to us, when we call upon

him, without fail. But will we even recognize him once he arrives, or will we mistake him for the gardener, like Mary did?

Many of us last left Jesus back in Sunday school. Those truthful yet imprecise images of him may be adequate for a child, but they usually don't hold up well to the complex challenges of adulthood. Some of us aren't quite sure where we left Jesus, because we just sort of drifted away.

The good news is: Jesus is looking for us, just as we look for him, and it's never too late to start following, never too late to start being a faithful disciple. And though it's never too late, now is not soon enough, because the Risen Jesus is ready to move us away from the tomb toward a life so full of promise and joy that we can hardly imagine it. Resurrection is so much more than the hope of a heavenly home. Resurrection means new life now.

“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Nobody can take away our Lord. Nobody. The only person who can take Jesus away from you . . . is you. He's just not where we left him last, because he is arisen from the dead and left the tomb. Jesus is on the move, and he wants us to come with him, and to share the good news of his resurrection, as Mary did, so that everyone, including us, never suffers the panic of not knowing where Jesus is. Amen.