

John 20:1-18

Did you ever wonder why we celebrate worship on Sunday mornings? Because it was on the first day of the week, Sunday, that Mary went to the tomb only to find it empty. Jesus' body was laid in the tomb before the sun went down on the day before the Sabbath, and on the third day, which would be Sunday, the tomb was found empty. The Gospels of Mark and Luke tell of the women, a group of women, taking spices to the tomb early in the morning to prepare Jesus' body. Matthew says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went simply to see the tomb. John tells us it was Mary Magdalene by herself who went to the tomb. Most likely she went to mourn. According to the 8th chapter of the gospel of Luke, Jesus had saved her from the seven demons which had inhabited her body. He had given her back her life. John's gospel told us what she discovered, like all the other gospel accounts, was that there was no body in the tomb, it was empty!

Mary didn't relate the empty tomb with what Jesus had said about rebuilding the temple in three days. The first thing she thought of was that someone, the Romans? The Jewish rulers? Someone had moved the body. She ran to the disciples Peter and John telling them the body was gone. They ran to the tomb. Entering the tomb they saw the wrappings laying there, and the one that had wrapped his head was separate from the rest of the wrappings. It was neatly folded, by itself, away from the linen wrappings of the body. The Bible said the disciple who loved Jesus, whom we believe to be John, saw and believed. What did he believe? Mary's story about Jesus not being in the tomb? That someone had stolen the body? We don't know, because the author continues with "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." The men left, and Mary stayed.

She was beside herself with her tears, feeling a total sense of loss, she again bent over and looked into the tomb in her grief to see if the tomb really was empty, or if somehow the body had reappeared. What she saw most likely gave her the shock of a lifetime. There were two angels, one sitting where the head would have laid, and one where the feet would have been. They weren't there when the men looked; they asked Mary why she was weeping. They knew Jesus was alive, but Mary was still convinced that the body had been stolen. Turning away from them she saw who she thought was the gardener standing there. He, too, asked her why she was weeping; he also asked who she was looking for. Mary didn't recognize him, and said that if he would show her where the body is she would take it away.

Another shock as Jesus said her name “Mary”. As Jesus said her name Mary recognized Jesus for who he was. Jesus told Mary to return to the others and tell them that he was alive. She did just that saying, “I have seen the Lord.” We don’t know their reaction to this news, John didn’t record it. But we know it was true!

Jesus who was dead is now alive! The devil thought he had won when Jesus died on that cross, but Jesus won! Jesus conquered death. For us this means that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. It isn’t something we can earn. We can’t expect to have eternal life because we’ve donated food or clothing to those without. We can’t expect to have eternal life because we’ve been very kind and really good, obeying the secular laws and the commandments. We can’t expect to have eternal life because we’ve come to church on a regular basis. The only way we receive eternal life is through the grace of God that has been shown to us through our savior Jesus the Christ. Jesus died so that we can live eternally; so that we can be reunited with those we have loved and lost; most importantly so that we can praise and worship God who lives and reigns in heaven.

Yet this heavenly future, even though it is important, isn’t the message of the empty tomb. The message of the empty tomb is that the way we live this life is important. Even though our actions are not going to get us into heaven, our actions are important. We extend loving kindness to all people because Jesus values human life. Why? Because God created us. We were created in the image of God. God’s Spirit lives in each of us.

It is in this we find our hope. When we are feeling bereft, when we feel abandoned, when we feel the world is against us, when it seems as if no one knows our name, we remember Jesus calling the name of Mary in that garden and how her joy was restored. We know that when there is nothing left to hope for our hope is in Jesus who was resurrected from the dead so that we can know new life. A life filled with hopefulness that whether we live or we die we are with God. That God will never abandon us. That God will always love us. No matter how we live our life, when we repent of our sin and turn back to God, through the love that Jesus has shown us God welcomes us with open arms.

The tomb was empty, but our hearts are full.
All glory be to God.