

Robbed, Rescued, or Raised

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They 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 she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Never before, in the history of history, has a religion claimed that their God has died. In fact, that's pretty much one of the distinguishing marks of a god. Immortality. When Jesus claims to be the Son of God, then he dies on the cross, something entirely new has just happened. And the earliest disciples and followers of Christ had to figure out what this meant. Did this mean they had been duped, that Jesus wasn't really God at all? Or did this mean that God was so much more than they had ever imagined?

On Friday, Jesus is crucified and dies. This is a huge blow to the disciples and other followers. They're dealing with the normal grief and shock that come at the loss of a loved one. But they also have the added burden to try to make sense of what happened theologically. But when Sunday comes, they really haven't had time to wrestle with their theology of what has happened. They are still in the mental fog that comes with mourning a death.

It's only three days later, but someone must go to the tomb. The burial was hasty, because of the Sabbath. Now they must complete their work. This is typically a job for women.

So Mary goes to the tomb. Imagine her complete shock to find that the tomb is empty! Try to put yourself in her shoes for a minute. Everything has happened so quickly, from Jesus' arrest and trial to his death. For the last three days, she probably hasn't slept or eaten well. She and the others are worried about what's going to happen next. You know how when you're really tired, your brain doesn't seem to function as well or as quickly as usual?

In that state of mind, when she sees the empty tomb, what must have flashed through her mind? Am I in the right place? This *is* where we put him, right? If it had been me, I think I would have been completely speechless. And confused. It's no wonder that Mary's first thought is to go get some of the other disciples.

In that hazy time, between Mary's first discovery of the empty tomb and her conversation with the risen Christ, Mary's mind is probably spinning as she tries to understand what has happened. And several possibilities probably crossed her mind.

First, the tomb may have been robbed. Grave robbing was nothing new in Jesus' day. Desperate people would ransack the final resting place of the dead looking for anything of value. Anyone who knew Jesus at all would have known he wouldn't have valuables buried with him. But someone from outside the movement, someone who only knew that Jesus was popular, that a crowd followed him and called him 'king,' might have thought otherwise. Finding nothing, grave robbers may have been angry or frustrated enough to move the body.

Or the Romans had been worried from the beginning that Jesus' own disciples would move the body. The Romans 'knew' that Jesus would die, end of story. No resurrection or coming back to life. But they were worried the disciples couldn't handle that, and that a select few might move the body, thus 'proving' to the rest of the followers that Jesus had risen. So according to the book of Matthew, the Romans sealed the stone that covered the grave, and left a

contingent there to guard it. But what if the Romans had really stolen the body, as a way to further taunt his followers? Or, even worse, what if a couple of the disciples had actually done what the Romans were afraid of?

Why is the tomb empty? Because it has been robbed. Of course, maybe that's not what happened. Maybe Jesus was rescued. Up to the very end, the disciples had expected that somehow Jesus would be spared the horrible death on the cross. Somehow, someone would come to rescue him. There would be some reprieve. Some last moment pardon. Some band of good guys on thundering hooves. Or even that someone with power, like Pilate, would give him a last minute reprieve. But Jesus is not rescued from the pain and suffering of the cross. Jesus is not spared the agony of death nor the silence of the tomb.

But maybe then Mary remembered Lazarus. Despite the fact that Mary and Martha (a different Mary) sent word that their brother Lazarus was fatally ill, Jesus didn't come to heal him. Jesus heals lots of people in the gospels, and this family was close friends with Jesus. They really believed he'd come. Instead, Jesus intentionally comes several days after Lazarus has died. He leads Mary, Martha and a crowd of others to Lazarus' tomb. And then, Jesus calls out to the dead man. And Lazarus walks out of the tomb, still wrapped in his funeral linens.

But was Lazarus resurrected? Was he raised? Resurrection has a sense of permanency to it. We are left with the impression that some time after this incident, maybe in 10 years, maybe in 30, Lazarus is going to die. Again. He was merely rescued. Temporarily saved from death. Singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer has creatively envisioned what life was like for Lazarus after Jesus brings him back to life. The chorus goes:

I'm the one that he saved
I'm the one that he raised
From a dark quiet sleep

from the peace of the grave.
I'm the one who owes much but that no one will touch
Mothers see me and cry
Dogs bare teeth as I walk by.

Then in the final verse, we hear Lazarus quietly reflect on what it means to have this temporary kind of resurrection:

I ought to be grateful to drink from the grail
But I don't belong either side of this veil.
I look down at my hands that are clasped in my lap.
When he left this world I thought he'd take me back.

The Mary at Jesus' tomb this morning was Mary Magdalene, not Lazarus' sister. But she would have known the story of this miracle about Lazarus. She may even have been a witness to this. And looking at Jesus' empty tomb, she would probably have thought back to this event. If Jesus could bring Lazarus back to life, could he do it to himself? Was Jesus in fact the one who rolled away the stone from his own tomb? From the inside? If so, then where is he now? And what will the Romans or the Pharisees do to him when they find out he's alive again?

And then there's a moment in our story this morning that is the turning point for Mary in understanding what has happened. Jesus calls her by name. "Mary," he calls out. "Do not hold on to me..." Which has the sense of saying, "don't touch me." And now we know that this is different than Lazarus. The first thing Jesus does when Lazarus walks out of the tomb is tell the people to unwrap the funeral cloths. So clearly, it was okay to touch him. But something different is happening with Jesus.

Everyone saw him die. He was clearly dead when they put him in the tomb. And now he looks so alive! He looks just like he did a few days ago. In about a week, Jesus will appear to the 11 disciples, and he will allow Thomas to touch him. But for now, Jesus is trying to help Mary understand that he is not dead, but he is also not alive. Not in the sense that he was a few days

ago. Not in the sense that Lazarus was when he came out of his tomb. Jesus has been resurrected – raised and wholly changed. Jesus’ death was not the end. Instead, it is the beginning of something new and wonderful.

So Jesus tells Mary to go spread the word to the rest of the disciples. Jesus’ tomb was not robbed, nor was Jesus rescued or given temporary respite from death. Instead, he was raised above death. Raised beyond death, to something new. Raised to live with God.

So the Easter message comes to us with two pieces. Yes, Easter is a day of resurrection. It is the day that Jesus finally gets through to the disciples that he will be able to give them eternal life with God. And it is a day that promises to us that same eternal life. You want to go to heaven? Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

But my Easter, your Easter, does not come at the day of our death. Or even three days after. It can come to us as early as today. Jesus is ready to raise us above – not yet above death, but above the emptiness of selfish living. With his life and with his death, Jesus pointed to a way that places more value on others than on self. That places a priority on God, not on society.

It may be more magical and mysterious to be raised from the dead, but it is no less miraculous to be saved from a life of meaninglessness. It is immediate, it is now, and it is ongoing. The true joy of Easter is in knowing that yes Jesus was raised above death, and one day so will we, but that we can be raised right now, even today. We can begin to see the Kingdom of God active around us, even now. Alleluia! Amen and amen.