

Our Great High Priest

Preached on Easter Sunday
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
April 4, 2021
Text: John 20: 11-16

The passage we read a few minutes ago in John continues:

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said unto her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round, and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” 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, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher.)”

We are so privileged this morning to be living in a time on the other side of the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Mary Magdalene was on our side of the Resurrection also, but still in a state of shock. The world had changed, a new reality was dawning, and there were no categories with which to make sense of it. Jesus had made all things new; but Mary, no doubt exhausted and in despair, was just trying to do what had to be done. She and the other women could not anoint Jesus’s body on the Sabbath, but she got to the tomb early on the first day of the week. The body needed to be properly prepared. But there was the issue of the stone. Who was going to move the stone?

According to John, Mary Magdalene was the first one at Jesus’ tomb, looked inside and saw no body, and then ran to meet Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, saying “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.” The other Gospels report the names of the women who had accompanied her to the tomb and they are identified in Luke 24 as Joanna and Mary, the mother of James. These women were probably some of Jesus’ earliest followers. In fact, Luke 8 informs us that a couple of these women, among others, provided for the daily needs of Jesus and his disciples, out of their own resources.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were also followers of Jesus, but in secret. Yet, they received permission from Pilate to remove the body of Christ from the cross and bury it. Joseph was a righteous man and a member of the council. He had not consented to the kangaroo court that convicted Jesus. Nicodemus had purchased about 100 pounds of spices, myrrh and aloe, and the two men quickly wrapped Jesus and the

spices in a linen shroud and laid him in a rock tomb where no one had ever laid. There was some urgency because the Day of Preparation was at hand. Mary Magdalene and the other women sat down across from the tomb and watched till they had to leave because of the Sabbath.

The first experience of the resurrection is told from Mary's point-of-view, which is strange given the lack of credibility given to womens' testimony at this time. She was dismayed upon finding the stone rolled away from the tomb and seeing it empty. She must have been frantic as she ran to find Peter and John. They went into the tomb and verified that Jesus was not there. The linens were there, including the towel-like piece of cloth that was tied under the chin and over the head of the corpse to hold the mouth shut. John took note that the cloth was folded and placed separately from the shroud. Peter and John quickly returned to their safe house, but Mary Magdalene would not leave. She was determined to find the lifeless body of Jesus and take care of it. Eventually she went back into the tomb and saw "two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain."

This detail of the two angels is a brilliant example of St. John's use of powerful imagery. By appealing to our visual imaginations, John paints stories that communicate profound theology. These images were meant for a specific audience. John's intended reader would have understood these word pictures because they were symbolic of an older narrative that already had meaning for them. Let us try to assume the viewpoint of a Jewish Christian in John's day. There's the stone slab where the body of Jesus had lain, and at either end is an angel. Now it might dawn on you that this scene was suggestive of something important in Hebrew history. You would recall God's instructions to Moses for the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat.

"And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold...and thou shalt make two cherubim of gold...one on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end. And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat..." (Exodus 25:17-22)

Now what does this mean? The Mercy Seat was kept in the Holy of Holies in the Temple and on the Day of Atonement a Jewish High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial victim upon the Mercy Seat, atoning for all of Israel. Incense was burnt first so that a cloud rose up, a sweet aroma of earnest prayer reaching heavenward. And if you were a Jewish Christian you would eventually grasp what John is doing here. He is declaring that the Tomb of Jesus is the true Holy of Holies and the Stone upon which his lifeless body was placed is the true Mercy Seat. This time, however, there are real angels, not angels hammered from gold. The Mercy Seat of Moses is perfected in the Mercy Seat Mary found that first Easter morning. This is a prime example of what is called an "ordering principle" in Christian theology: God does not discard his creation, he appropriates it, assuming it into a higher reality and thus perfecting it. God uses types, and symbols, and even people to presage his future plans for the world. The author of Hebrews calls them copies or shadows. The ancient Mercy Seat was a copy of something better, something fuller and finally complete. God doesn't

throw anything away. He draws it toward himself and so brings it to its final end. In other words, grace does not destroy nature; it perfects it.

God continues to retain, assume, enlarge, transform, and to perfect his works. And so the Mercy Seat that Mary discovered is the transformed and perfected Mercy Seat of the Old Testament. But an even greater transformation has occurred. By the grace and specific institution of Jesus the Messiah, on the night in which he was betrayed, we have a greater Mercy Seat and it is right here in front of us—the Altar. As the old priests of Israel once sprinkled the Mercy Seat with the blood of sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament; and as Jesus Christ crucified, the Lamb of God, once lay upon the blood sprinkled Mercy Seat in the Tomb, now the resurrected Jesus comes to us daily, body and all, right there upon the Altar, as the source of everlasting mercy.

Now let's get back to Mary Magdalene. It is very likely that she had not slept much, if at all, and her last meal was probably with Jesus four days ago. She had seen terrible things, things you and I can hardly imagine, befall her Lord. Her grief was agonizing. She was drained, beyond weary, exhausted, very nearly used up. Had she not been so worn out from grief and fatigue, the sight of these numinous beings might have taken her breath away. Instead, her experience is hardly registering with her. Even when they ask her "Why are you weeping?" she answers straight-out and flatly: "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him."

At this point in the narrative, she turned around and Jesus was standing right there. But she did not recognize him—for obvious reasons. He was battered bloody the last time she saw him. He was mutilated—a gory, lifeless mess. No, she was not expecting a resurrection. No one even knew what that meant. She had no categories for such a thing. Mary assumed this man must be the gardener.

And here, once again, St. John is making a profound theological statement. Imagine again that you are a Jewish Christian encountering this story. Who was the First Gardener? Every Jewish child knew that Adam was the first gardener. By citing this piece of tradition in which Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, John is identifying Jesus with Adam. Here is the Last Adam in a garden that is bursting with life. And Jesus has a wound in his side just like the first Adam. In Genesis, the Mother of Humanity was taken from Adam's side. And so Holy Mother Church was taken from the side of the Last Adam when a Roman soldier opened up his side and water and blood poured forth. From the water of Baptism the Church is born and she is nurtured on the blood of Christ.

And then Jesus speaks. He said one word to her: "Mary." And instantly she recognized his voice. Without any theological categories by which to understand what was happening, she simply gave herself to his love. No one in the world could say Mary's name like Jesus. No one had ever loved her like Jesus. No one had ever taken the mess she and others had made of their lives and turned it into such beauty. She knew what it was to be used. And she knew what real love was after Jesus had come into her life. She had the experience of the resurrected Christ, but she could not begin to fathom it. All she knew was that the robust man standing in front of her, full of life, strength, power and love was Jesus and she was his.

We too are his, and, like Mary, are growing to understand the mystery and power of the Resurrection in our Christian lives. In 325 A.D. ,the bishops in council at Nicaea gave the Church the creedal declaration that not only was our Lord Jesus Christ “crucified under Pontius Pilate,” but that “on the third day her rose again” and because he rose “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” This is the faith of the Church: that the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross and was raised, body and all, from the dead, never to die again and that his resurrection was the prototype of our own resurrection.

But it is one thing to grasp a creed; another altogether to encounter him of whom the creeds speak. As we come to the Altar, as we receive the life of Jesus, our Lord and our God, in the palm of our hand and upon our tongue, let us truly take to heart what St. Paul says in our Epistle for today. Our life is hid with Christ in God. He now *is* our life. He has opened the way to perfect communion with God. He has torn away the curtain separating off the sanctuary, whose presence had represented the impossibility of true remission of sins. So now, as the author of Hebrews states, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way he opened for us.” (10: 19-20). Through our great high priest, we can now “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” (22) This is why today, and every day, we can be people of true joy.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!