

## Scriptures

### John 20:1-18

20 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. 2 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." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb.

He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 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.

13 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." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

17 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.'" 18 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.

### Sermon: Into the tomb

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Mary; a woman filled with grief, filled with faith, and filled with a mission. She was on her way to the tomb of Jesus. Jesus was killed on Friday, Saturday was the Sabbath, and this morning, the first day of the week, Mary walked to the tomb to do what needed to be done.

We think back to a few days earlier, when a woman with an alabaster jar of spikenard anointed Jesus at a dinner party. Some gospels call her Mary, perhaps it was this Mary who approached the tomb in the dark of the morning. After he was anointed by this woman, the men there complained about the attention that this 'impure' woman was lavishing upon Jesus, to which Jesus responded 'Leave her alone. She poured perfume on my body to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'

One woman prepared Jesus' body for burial, and one woman comes now, to finish the job, to care for the body of Jesus.

Our culture prefers to avoid bodies. While we claim that we are nothing but animals, we simultaneously rail against our own physicality. We cover up the sight of our bodies, the smell. We are embarrassed by our infirmities and limitations – we fight age – not the advancement of years, but we fight the appearance of age. While we are living, we spend far too much time living in denial of our bodily existence. Once life has left the body, the body becomes even more an object of distaste.

I've been to several memorial services where there is only a picture of the one who has died; no body, not even ashes. Bodies are unsightly and remind us of things we'd rather not think of, so we hide them away - out of sight, out of our minds. We hold funerals for the dead, but the dead aren't invited.

But bodies are important. Jesus wasn't just a spirit - he had a body – flesh and blood, bone and tendon. The divine became physical, and in doing so brought honor to all of creation. Bodies matter. Matter matters. Mary knew this. She came, in faith, in fear, to care for the body of Jesus.

I remember my grandmother's funeral. She had been cremated, and after the funeral in the church there was a graveside service. Some words were said, there was a little hole that had been dug over my grandfather's grave – a little pile of earth covered with a little green blanket off to the side.

The words were done; people looked at each other, not knowing if it was over, or what to do. So I took my grandma's box, got down on my knees and put it in the hole, and started to fill it in. After a minute one of my young cousins came beside me, and we silently buried grandma, all dressed up in our suits, on our knees in the dirt. This was our last act of caring that we could do for her.

This is what Mary was planning to do on that cold, dark morning. As she approached, she was likely asking herself 'how will I move the stone?' This is a good question – a stone big enough to cover a hole big enough to walk or crawl through is going to weigh hundreds of pounds – one person is not going to be able to move it on their own. But she was determined, and so she continued – Mary wanted to perform this last act of love, of service, for their Lord's remains. She was a picture of devotion, heading to the tomb of her Lord.

If we fast forward a few hours we find the disciples hiding in the upper room where they had eaten with Jesus before everything went wrong. They knew the body was missing, Mary had told them about the man in the graveyard who she thought was the gardener, but turned out to be Jesus. They knew, but they were afraid – they didn't quite believe Mary, nobody knew what was going on, but one thing they were sure of was that there would be trouble ahead.

John's gospel says 'When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."'

Hiding in the house with the doors locked. Suddenly, Jesus is in there with them. I don't know what kind of resurrection body Jesus had, but apparently, he could walk through walls or locked doors. He ate some fish with them, Thomas poked and prodded him, so he was physical, a body of flesh and bone – and yet – locked doors are no barrier to him.

This tells us something very important about the tomb, and about the stone. Mary approached the tomb that morning and saw the stone had been moved, but the stone was not rolled away to let the resurrected Jesus out. He could walk through walls - the stone was no more an obstacle for Jesus than the locked door of the upper room was. The stone was not rolled away to let Jesus out; the stone was rolled away to let us in.

On Good Friday Jesus was carried into the tomb; on Easter morning, we are invited into that same tomb. When Peter and the other disciples came running at the news and arrived at the open tomb, that's just what they did.

Afraid? – yes they were. The first disciple paused at the entry and looked in through the gloom. Bold Peter ran right in. They both ended up inside, and in the tomb they found the grave clothes of Jesus, the wrappings for the body, and they saw the head scarf tossed into the corner.

Have you ever been in a tomb? How about in a graveyard, in the still of the early morning? It can either be peaceful, or unsettling. I had the chance to spend some time in the land of the Holy One a few years back, and I visited the tomb of Jesus.

There is a massive church that has been built over top of this tomb. It's an ornate building, filled with gold and silver, incense and prayers, and so many people that it's hard to move around. But it seems that it is the church that most people have come to see – the tomb itself is a small cave in the corner of the church that I had to walk down to, and there were no lights at all.

Fortunately, I usually carry a small flashlight in my man purse, so I got out my light and went in. In the cave were two smaller holes, each just big enough to put a body in. I turned out my light, and slipped into one of the holes and lay there for a while in the dark.

A couple came into the cave while I was in there – I think they were a little scared to find someone laying in there, in the dark – they left pretty quickly and I was alone again.

It was a powerful experience - to lay where Jesus lay, in the dark, just the Spirit of God and myself. But travelling to East Jerusalem and crawling into the cave where Jesus' body lies is not the invitation to enter that I am talking about.

The stone rolled away says this. Jesus is alive – halleluiah. Now it's time for us to die.

Jesus told us this before he was crucified; he said to his disciples 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.'

In allowing himself to die on the cross, and not summoning a legion of angels to come rescue him, Jesus put our needs ahead of his own. His desires died, so that we would live. Let's not forget Jesus praying in the garden the night before he was killed. Jesus didn't want to die – it's too easy to picture Jesus as the almighty God who stoically did what needed to be done, but let's not forget the human Jesus who cried out to his father 'is there any other way?' Jesus put others before himself.

Humanity, however, did the opposite. The crowds and the leaders present put their own desires ahead of the life of another. Their fear of the Romans, their fear of losing control, their fear of what might

happen if they let this man whom the people loved lived for another day – their fear was more important than his life.

On that cross was revealed the patient, suffering love of God, and the vindictive fearfulness found in the human heart.

Sin was crucified with Jesus – the sins of all of us were placed on him. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, our sins were reflected back at us – he was showing us exactly what sin looks like – bloody, gruesome – our sins result in unjust and undeserved suffering for others. And sin is simply this – putting our own desires ahead of everyone or everything else. Me first.

Jesus died under our sins, and yet he lived. This is an invitation for us – Jesus has mapped the way into the Kingdom of God. Like Jesus, we also need to die to ourselves – to our desires, our want for power, control, influence and fame. ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’ When we put others needs ahead of our own wants, when we die to ourselves as Jesus did, only then can we also follow him into life.

Because, nobody comes out of the tomb, except those who have already gone into it. Jesus’ resurrection life is only available after we have shared in Jesus’ death. If we allow the old self, the selfish self, to die, then we can be risen with Christ. Our eternal life starts now.

The Living Faith says that eternal life begins in this life; that whoever believes in the Son of God already has eternal life. This means that while we have something to look forward to after death, the resurrection has a profound impact on the here and now, on our current lives. The empty cross, the resurrected Jesus, this renews our spirits right now, in this place, in this moment. The resurrection gives us a new life in the present. No longer are we bound to our old ways, our old selves.

The stone has been rolled away; the tomb beckons each one of us. We are afraid, but if we are going to call ourselves followers of Jesus, we need to actually follow him. Into the tomb as mortal men and women, then out of the tomb as immortal citizens of the Kingdom of Peace, the Kingdom of God.

Halleluiah and thanks be to God.

Amen.