

"See the Risen Lord!"

"Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). Thanks be to God! Amen.

Dear friends, sometimes it's good to know how the story ends. Sure, reading the back page of a book can remove the suspense, and ruin the book. Hearing the surprise ending of a movie before you've seen the movie can spoil it for you.

But sometimes, it's good to know how the story ends. It's good for us to know the end of the story that took Jesus to his death on the cross. Here it is: Jesus is alive!

When you came here this morning, you knew what to expect. You knew that we would be talking about Jesus rising from the dead. You knew that today would be different from, say this past Friday, when many of us sat in darkness and sang somber songs. You even dressed differently, and so did I. We knew what to expect. And I suspect that so far, you've found exactly what you were expecting. You found our early morning Courtyard adorned with flowers. We've been singing happy songs and reading Scriptures about death being overcome by life. That's the very reason that we've come together this morning.

But what if you didn't know the end of the story? What if you didn't know what to expect? How would things be different? This morning's Easter Gospel invites us to think about that. It invites us to travel to Jesus' tomb early in the morning and to see what Mary Magdalene saw. It invites us to run with Peter and John to witness the tomb for ourselves, and it invites us to stand outside the tomb with Mary to hear the voice of the Savior speak a tender word to us. And taking the time to do that this morning may just help us to appreciate all the more what a great blessing it is that we know how the story ends.

So let's begin our journey. Mary is with us, called Mary Magdalene, and though John doesn't mention it here, there are other women along with her on the way. In modern terms, I suppose we might say that Mary was looking for some closure. She wanted one more opportunity to honor Jesus by anointing his body with spices, the chance to see him one more time, much in the same way that we might pause at the casket of a loved one's funeral.

But as Mary approached the tomb, she saw that the large stone that had sealed its entrance was no longer in its place. She ran to find the disciples and to tell them what she had seen. Only she didn't stop at telling them that the stone had been moved away. She said, **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"** Mary's mind was racing and she settled on the only possible explanation she could come up with. Someone moved Jesus' body. The mourning that Mary came to do was changed to distress. She had come to pay respects, and now she couldn't.

Mary didn't yet know the end of the story. She was sad and confused. Can you relate? Have you mourned the loss of a loved one? And if you haven't, how long do you suppose that it might be before you do? The world that we live in is a world of sin and death. It's a world that requires cemeteries. No matter how close we are to someone, no matter how dear that person is to us, our time together is limited. Even the one who had once cast demons out of Mary, who had inspired her unrelenting devotion, had been taken away from her. She had gone to the tomb to see a dead Jesus. She would soon see something so much better.

But first, let's watch the reactions of Peter and John. John, Jesus' beloved disciple, probably a bit younger than Peter, raced ahead to the tomb. When he arrived, he stood at the entrance peering in. Peter, though he couldn't keep up with John's speed, wasn't about to wait outside the tomb.

Instead, he ran right past John and into the tomb. John eventually followed suit, and both of them saw a very interesting sight. Strips of linen lay there neatly. A burial cloth was carefully folded near them. This wasn't the haphazard work of a robber. If someone had stolen Jesus' body away, wouldn't they have simply taken the cloth and linens along with it? The disciples could see the evidence. They could put it together. John himself testifies that he did. He believed. He realized that Jesus had risen from the dead. But it still didn't quite make sense. Neither Peter nor John understood that the Scriptures said that Jesus would rise from the dead.

Do you see the problem? Peter and John relied quite a bit on what they were able to see, but they relied too little on God's Word. Perhaps they recalled that Jesus himself had talked about rising from the dead. But they were overwhelmed. They were trying to reason things through. They should have been listening to the Scriptures.

The Scriptures teach plainly, both in the Old Testament, and for us even more clearly in the New, about a Savior from sin. They teach about a servant who would suffer even though he didn't deserve it and would do so in the place of those who did deserve it. He would die a death like that of the wicked, but would not be abandoned to the grave. Instead he would rise victorious, once and for all defeating death by defeating sin that gives death its power over us.

Instead of focusing on Scripture, Peter and John focused on what they saw. They had seen Jesus' lifeless body laid in the tomb. And when it was no longer there, they were slow to understand. See, when we look too intently at the world around us, we are slow to understand what it means for us that Jesus has risen from the dead. The Bible tells us. Because Jesus lives, we too will live. Because Jesus lives, our sins are forgiven, every last one. Because Jesus lives, we have nothing to fear. Heaven is our home.

The doubts and fears come from looking at something else. The uncertainty and confusion comes when we stray away from God's Word. The overwhelming sadness and despair creep in when we focus on what we see around us every day and not on what God tell us in his Word. That is why we need that Word. Only there can we truly see our risen Lord.

There was one more piece of the Easter puzzle waiting to be revealed. John and Peter were starting to understand that Jesus really had risen, but they wouldn't get it until they saw him. But they didn't see him right away.

Jesus first gave that honor to Mary. I suppose that after Mary told Peter and John about her encounter with the tomb, she walked back, following the disciples as they ran on ahead. Eventually she found her place to mourn. She stood outside the tomb and cried. Through her tears she peered into the tomb to find two angels looking back. "Why are you crying?" They asked. She was crying because her Lord was missing. Someone had taken him, and she wanted to know where he was.

Little did she know that he was standing right behind her. For whatever reason, she did not recognize him. But he knew her. "Why are you crying?" He asked.

Was this the gardener? Did he know? "If you have taken him somewhere, just tell me where. I'll go. I'll get him." And then came that moment: the surprise ending, the twist that Mary couldn't even imagine. It was the moment that dried her sad tears and filled her with unspeakable joy.

Jesus said to her, "Mary." Her Lord and her teacher was alive again.

I know. You saw it coming. You knew the end of the story. But the depths of Mary's despair and the heights of her joy should say something to you, too. Jesus, through his Holy Word, has given you the chance to walk to his tomb, to peer in at the linens, to listen to the voice of angels, and most importantly to hear one word from the lips of your living Lord. Doesn't he speak your

name? Aren't the pages of Scripture filled to overflowing with the wonderful news? Jesus says to you, "I died for your sins, and now I am alive again. I returned to the Father so that I could be with you always. I will take you to be with me. Even though and even if you die, you will live with me forever."

Mary went back to the disciples with good news to share. She said, **"I have seen the Lord!"** You, too have seen the Lord, the risen Lord. You've seen him through eyes of faith. You've viewed him from the perspective of his followers so many years ago. You've witnessed his resurrection through the testimony of the Holy Scriptures. So now what? So now let's see him again! Let's keep on coming back to the empty tomb to find the assurance of our forgiveness. I'm talking about today. Let's keep singing happy songs and wishing each other Happy Easter. Let's keep celebrating with special music and a Festival Worship service. But I'm not only talking about today. Let's keep coming together in future weeks to see the Savior together. Let's open the pages of the Bible for ourselves and find him there. And let's go to others, who maybe haven't heard the end of the story. And let's tell them, "I have seen the Lord. He is risen."

The Text: John 20:1–18 (NIV84)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.