

April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

HAPPY ENDINGS, NEW BEGINNINGS

Some of us have heard this story so many times we may be numb to it and miss the details because we are so familiar with the main plot line. On the other hand, there may be some here who only have a vague understanding about this thing Christians call the resurrection. They might miss the details of the story because the main plot line seems so unbelievable. Let me just take a moment to say that is ok. If anyone tells you it's wrong to doubt this story or even if they say you have to believe it or you're going to the bad place, they are wrong. There is no devil in this story. For today just listen and don't worry about whether you believe it or not. It's a really good story with a happy ending and no violence or adult language.

One of the notable details in John's version of the story is that it begins with Mary Magdalene venturing out alone into the still-dark dawn. This Mary was one of the most faithful of Jesus' disciples. Contrary to popular belief, the original disciples of Jesus were not all men. Also contrary to popular belief, Mary Magdalene was never a hussy or a prostitute or a so-called sinner who changed only after Jesus showed her the error of her ways. She probably was independently wealthy and she gave up her comfortable life-style to follow Jesus. Literally, she followed him from their home town near the Sea of Galilee in the North, along the Jordan River and through the hill country to Jerusalem. She has been with him for a long time. She has been fed by him literally and spiritually. And now, she has lost all hope. She had no idea what she was going to do with herself. Because he was dead. She knew it. She had watched him die, she had watched them lay him in the tomb and she had watched them seal that tomb up.

Mary gets up before daylight. Surely her grief is so consuming she can't sleep. She goes to the tomb although there is no logical reason to do so. She just needs to be near the place where he was buried. And she discovers that the opening to the tomb has been unsealed. She sees enough to know that the body was not there. She runs all the way back, finds Peter and John and tells them about it and the three of them all run back together.

There are some historical reasons that the writer of John would make such a point of these details. First, Peter and John are the two most often mentioned of the twelve named disciples.. A woman's testimony, even a prominent woman like Mary Magdelene, was not considered reliable unless it was corroborated by two male witnesses. Peter and John have credibility. So, we have all these details about who got to the tomb first, who did what when. John arrives first. He looks but doesn't venture in. Then Peter, always the impetuous one, gets there and he just barges right in. Peter sees the fresh, clean grave clothes lying there. This detail is important because the clothes were made of expensive linen and if the tomb had been violated by grave robbers, as Mary assumed, the robbers would have taken the linens as well as the body.

When John sees the grave clothes and no body, he believes, but we don't know what exactly he believes. He must mean he just started to get some kind of inkling because at that point, before they have encountered the risen Lord, they still don't understand. So the two of them return to their homes. The urgency that brought them to the tomb has been replaced with confusion.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. She has not gone inside as the men did, but she bent over to look more closely. The artists always seem to paint the tomb with a gigantic doorway leading into a room large enough for a man to stand up in. But that probably wasn't what it was like. There are lots of these first century tombs that have been excavated in Israel and most of them you have to

bend over, almost crawl into if you were to go inside. So, Mary is bending down, looking in, she can't stop sobbing for all that she has lost. She sees two angels sitting where the body should have been—angels who apparently were not there before, or were not visible to John and Peter.

And these Angels ask her why she is weeping. If this was a movie or a tv show she'd go into a rant: "what do you mean why am I weeping. I have lost everything in the world that means anything to me, I have no hope left, and now his body is gone and your sitting there asking me why I'm weeping. Why do you think I'm weeping."

But if you have ever experienced the kind of intense grief she was feeling, you know that there is a period of time when the grief is fresh and intense where your brain just doesn't seem to work right. Mary doesn't realize that the angels are asking her a rhetorical question. She apparently hasn't processed the fact that she's talking to angels. She says I'm crying because **"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."**

And just at that moment, Jesus speaks to her. Ignoring her response to the angels, he says **"Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"** But she doesn't realize who he is. This phenomena shows up in the other Gospels as well. The risen Lord appears to people who are not able immediately to recognize him. Because his is not the human body of a resuscitated corpse. It is a body for sure, later he will eat and drink with the disciples. He will invite doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. But it is a changed body. A transformed body.

So Mary starts in on her main concern: continuing to weep, she gets the words out. She just wants to know where to find the body of her beloved teacher. And then everything changes for her. He calls her by name.

And then she knew. Her brain didn't have to process anything. Without saying to herself "how can this be?" she knew with absolute certainty who he was

and what that meant. She knew because he knew her and he called her by name. That is the happy ending for Mary. He is not dead. He lives.

And here is the happy ending for us. He lives still. He lives and He calls us all by name. He loves us all. Even the ones who don't know him. Even the ones who don't believe it happened. Even the ones who do believe, but find it hard sometimes, the ones who doubt and question. Even those who believed once, but have lost their faith. He knows us all. He loves us all and he calls us by name.

That is the happy ending that really is also the beginning. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Halleluia. Amen.