

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026

John 20:1-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My friends, the members of this congregation are aware that I am retiring. My last day will be Sunday, May 24th. So preaching today stirs up some deep emotions within me. It is possible that this will be my last Easter sermon; certainly my last here at Vasa.

That being the case, I wish to emphasize two points from today's Scripture reading. The first point has to do with the fact that Jesus first reveals himself to Mary Magdalene—a woman. The second point is to examine the gradual process that the closest followers of Jesus go through in learning that Jesus is alive.

All four gospels state that Jesus' first appearance after being raised from the dead is to Mary Magdalene. It is important to acknowledge this fact and to state it clearly. She is the first to bear the good news/gospel that the tomb is empty. Later, she is the first one to say, "I have seen the Lord." Some commentators are so bold as to say that Mary is the apostle to the apostles. Why is this important? Peter and the beloved disciple run to the garden after Mary's first report to them, but Jesus doesn't appear to them. Ever wonder why? Because appearing to a woman means that from God's perspective women have the authority to share the good news that Jesus is alive and can do so just as effectively as men. Women have voices that can and should be used to preach the good news of Jesus. Sometimes if one wants to hear the good news, one MUST listen to the women.

And now to my second point: the gradual process that all of these followers of Jesus go through as they come to understand that Jesus is alive.

We begin with Mary. Something compels her to go to the tomb. It is very early in the morning, so early that it is still dark. What Mary discovers upon arrival is that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. We are not told that she looked inside; it seems that she assumes that someone(s) has taken Jesus' body based on the fact that the entrance is open.

Mary runs back and reports to Simon Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do

not know where they have laid him." At this moment Mary has one piece of information: the stone is rolled away.

The two men now run to the tomb in some sort of semi-comical footrace. The beloved disciple wins the race and stooping looks inside the tomb. He recognizes that the tomb is empty when he sees the linen grave cloths that the Lord had been wrapped in lying in a pile. But he does not enter it. In this way this disciple adds another detail to the information being gathered: stone rolled away, grave cloths empty.

Peter, ever the impetuous one, physically enters the tomb. Not only does he see the grave cloths, he also sees the special cloth that was covering Jesus' face neatly folded and off to the side. With Peter inside, the beloved disciple also enters the tomb. Now they have even more information: stone rolled away, grave cloths laying there, face cloth in a separate place, and Jesus' body is not there.

At this point the men leave. They "go back to their homes." They apparently don't stop to talk to Mary who has returned to the tomb after them. She is weeping and emotionally distraught. Still she looks into the tomb again, and this time she sees two angels who ask her why she is weeping. She answers them, and from her words, it seems that she still assumes that Jesus' body has been moved: not that he is alive.

Suddenly, she turns and there he is: Jesus. Only she still doesn't recognize him. It's not clear why: perhaps she can't recognize him through her tear swollen eyes. Perhaps it's because when you see something for which there is no reasonable earthly explanation, your brain just cannot comprehend; cannot process.

And that's when Jesus speaks her name, "Mary." Instantly she recognizes her Lord and responds with the tender words, "My teacher!" It is in that moment of recognition that we all breathe a sigh of relief. Finally, finally, finally, Jesus is revealed. Finally, finally, finally, we know the answer to the mystery. Where is Jesus' body? Right there in front of her and even more amazing: he is alive. Now at last Mary recognizes her lord and teacher.

I find it comforting that Mary doesn't recognize Jesus at first. That suggests that Mary is simply a regular human being, like all of us. We can relate to the fact that in her sorrow and grief, she cannot recognize her lord. How many of us have experienced the brain fog that sets in when someone we love dies? That's part of what's

going on with Mary. But there is also that wonderful and emotional moment of clarity when Jesus calls her by name.

Earlier in this gospel Jesus called himself the “good shepherd.” When he made that comparison he went on to say, “the sheep hear [the good shepherd’s] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him *because they know his voice.*” (John 10:3-4) Mary knew Jesus’ voice the moment he called her by name. I trust and believe that even though I have never met Jesus face-to-face, nor heard his voice, that when he calls my name, I will know him. I trust and believe that the same will be true for each of you. When Jesus calls your name, and he will someday, you will know him without question.

The good shepherd verses come from John 10. A few verses later in verse 11 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” On this day, this Easter Sunday we recognize that Jesus, our good shepherd, laid down his life for us, his sheep. He is a good shepherd because he was willing to lay down his life on the cross to demonstrate the depth of his love *for* and commitment *to* us. This love stretches beyond our human imaginations—it is grace upon grace. It is God’s love on display for the whole world to see. *(Pause)*

We might certainly call Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the unnamed beloved disciple, the most fervent of Jesus’ disciples. They had followed him across Galilee and heard him teach for a long time. They believed that he was the messiah. But even with their depth of commitment it still took time for them to realize that he was alive. None of them had an instant understanding or belief that Jesus was resurrected. Each of them built on the understandings of the person before them and it began with Mary simply going to the tomb.

What does this mean for us? My message to you is not just to proclaim that Jesus is alive—as important as that is. My message to you is to remember that faith is established and encouraged in community; by one person going to the tomb, by a second one daring to peep inside, and by a third daring to step inside that tomb. We need the words and witness of the people around us: especially when we are drawn to a tomb-like place and we cannot comprehend what we are seeing, or perhaps when we dare to peep inside that tomb-like place and still don’t understand what we are seeing. For many belief is a process; and that process may take a long time and many witnesses. We need each other, especially

when life is difficult; especially when we find it nearly impossible to believe. God is at work in our world, my friends. Never doubt it. We may not fully comprehend what God is doing, but God is active. On this day, this Easter Sunday, we have the strongest proof of all: Jesus is alive.

Figuring out how to end a sermon is almost always hard. But for today, I conclude by proclaiming like Mary Magdalene, “The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!” Amen.