

Sermon: April 4, 2010, Easter Sunday  
“Jesus: The Risen Lord”

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John 20:1-18

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. <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> 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.’” <sup>18</sup> **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.**

Well, did you make it through April Fool’s Day on Thursday unscathed? Also called All Fools’ Day, this light-hearted day of the year has an interesting history – at least I think it does. I did some internet research on the background of the day and realized one might not be able to separate fact from foolery, if you will. Whether fact or foolery, this is what I learned.

Some attribute the day to the time of year and its turn from winter to spring leading people to lighthearted ways of celebration. The Romans had a festival named Hilaria celebrated on March 25<sup>th</sup> every year which encouraged pranks and foolishness. The Jewish festival of Purim still encourages children to dress up as different characters in the story. It is the most lighthearted of Jewish festivals celebrating the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction at the hands of Haman, a story recounted in the biblical book of Esther. Others attribute April Fools Day to the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar ordered by Pope Gregory 13<sup>th</sup> in 1582. It shifted New Year's day from April 1 to January 1, but many refused to accept the new date and continued to celebrate on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Soon others began to make fun of these people by sending them on fool's errands or by trying to trick them into believing something that was made up.

Whatever the origins of the day, there have been some great hoaxes carried out over the years. According to the "Museum of Hoaxes" here are some of the top April Fool's Day tricks of all time:

- *The Swiss Spaghetti Harvest* – in 1957, the respected BBC news show *Panorama* announced that Swiss farmers were enjoying a bumper spaghetti crop due to the elimination of the dreaded spaghetti weevil. Film footage showing Swiss peasants pulling down strands of spaghetti from trees prompted huge numbers of calls from viewers. Asking how

they could grow their own spaghetti, the BBC replied “place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best.”

- *Instant Color TV* – in 1962, the only TV channel in Sweden was black and white. On April Fool’s Day the station announced viewers could convert their existing sets to color reception by putting a nylon stocking over the TV screen. Thousands of people reportedly tried it out.
- *The Taco Liberty Bell* – in 1996 this prank drew hundreds of irate calls to the National Historic Park in Philadelphia when Taco Bell falsely announced it had purchased the Liberty Bell and renamed it the Taco Liberty Bell.
- *The Left-Handed Whopper* – in 1998 this prank was perpetrated with a full page newspaper ad. Burger King offered this new menu item which included all the same ingredients but with all the condiments rotated 180 degrees for their left-handed customers. When thousands requested the new sandwich (and many others asked to keep their right-handed version) the company issued a press release about the hoax.

Many still in our day would add the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ to this list of great hoaxes! According to a Harris poll, the number of Americans who believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ has dropped by 10 percentage points since 2003 to 70% of those surveyed indicating a continuing decline in those who believe in the reality of the resurrection. Many would

hold to a belief in the immortality of the soul, but not hold the affirmation of the Apostle's Creed which asserts belief in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Others would agree to a belief in resurrection as a metaphor for the new life of faith arising within those who believe in God leading them to experience a renewal and rebirth in life.

As Christians, though, we rest the ultimate trustworthiness of our faith on the reality of Christ's physical body being resurrected to new life on that first Easter day! All the Gospels build toward the climax of the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday as the whole reason for their witness to Jesus Christ. The account from John's Gospel which we read this morning is too vivid to simply dismiss it out of hand. The details in this account of the timing of events unfolding, the description of Mary and Peter and John running back and forth to and from the tomb, the detailed description of the grave clothes being folded in a particular way, and even the fact that a woman recently oppressed by as many as seven demons is the main character in John's account of this momentous event – all these things are too strange and unique to not be true! As C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author, once commented, there is enough about the Christian faith that is strange to make one believe it is true and not invented by human agents.

Once affirmed as true, Jesus' bodily resurrection leads us to affirm many other foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. I want to focus on several of those

in our time today. *First, Jesus' bodily resurrection is the seal of our salvation before God!* We all know the great cry "It is finished!" which Jesus made at the end of his hours of agony on the Cross on Good Friday. Today we will come to the Lord's Table again and celebrate his sacrifice on our behalf, taking the burden of our sin and its punishment upon himself. But in one sense, the assurance of our salvation was not sealed and complete on Good Friday. Without the resurrection on Easter, the validation of Christ's perfect sacrifice for us as God's only begotten Son would have been missing and incomplete. This reality is illustrated by an encounter between the disciples and the religious leaders which occurred a short time after Jesus' resurrection.

The apostles were being interrogated by the religious leaders for their refusal to refrain from preaching about Jesus' death and resurrection. Acts 5:33-39 recounts the important part of the story:

But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, 'Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'

These examples of other leaders and their followers who, for a time, were able to exercise influence is very instructive. Once the leaders were martyred and remained dead, they and their followers were never heard from again. This is

exactly why Jesus' death without his bodily resurrection does not complete the story. Without Jesus rising from the dead, in all likelihood nothing would have come of his followers over time. But the fact of Jesus' resurrection validates his unique identity as God's only son and seals the work done on Good Friday for us and for our salvation! This is why Paul speaks to the Corinthian church and says "if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:16-19) Thus, Christ's bodily resurrection validates him as God's only Son and seals our salvation through his sacrificial death on Good Friday as the unblemished Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

*Second, Jesus' bodily resurrection is the source of our hope in life and in death.* The main character of John's resurrection account, Mary Magdalene, is the focus of our attention in this case. She is Mary of Magdala, a village along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and she is listed in each of the resurrection accounts as the first and primary witness to this miraculous occurrence. This is miraculous in and of itself!

Only a few years earlier she had lived an unimaginable life under the oppression of seven demonic spirits. Luke tells us that she and several others suffering in this way were set free by Jesus' touch. From this point on, Mary

becomes a fully devoted follower of Jesus – no surprise there! She is even mentioned as providing material support for Jesus and the disciples as they carry out their ministry. The gospel accounts of Jesus' final hours place her as one of the witnesses at the foot of the cross, at the burial of Jesus, and of course at his resurrection as well. No doubt she would also have been in the crowd gathered before Pilate as Jesus was condemned to death and along the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows, as Jesus carried his cross to Calvary. I cannot even begin to imagine the crushing blow all these events dealt to this one who had given her devotion heart and soul to the Lord Jesus. Jesus had given her life back to her and she would follow him no matter what happened.

So it's no surprise she is at the tomb early that first resurrection morning to care for Jesus' broken body. But rather than carry out a ministry of compassion, her heart and spirit are struck another heavy blow as she discovers his body is gone. She runs to get Peter, and he and John literally race to the tomb to see for themselves – since they probably didn't trust her report as a woman, let alone one known to have been possessed by demons! They all must assume someone has stolen Jesus' body, though John seems to offer a small ray of hope as he is said to look in the tomb and believe. It couldn't have been without doubts, however, as he and Peter are said to have returned to their homes, perhaps fearing accusations of being involved in grave robbing or meddling to stir up the situation even more as his followers.

Mary, devoted follower as she is, remains at the tomb to determine what had really happened and do what she could to lessen this indignity that had been done. This leads to an encounter with angels who ask why she is weeping (I guess dumb questions are not limited to news reporters!) and, without her knowing it at first, the encounter with the risen Jesus. It makes complete sense she fails to recognize him – it is the dark hours of early morning, she is weeping and emotionally distraught from the events of the past few days and this early morning hour, and she has no expectation to see Jesus alive ever again after watching the horror of the crucifixion.

The one she thinks is a gardener asks “Whom are you looking for?” She repeats her desire to find and care for the body of her friend that has been taken away somewhere. Then comes the crucial moment – Jesus calls Mary by name and, in a rush, Mary knows she is face to face with her Lord! Heartache and discouragement and anger and fear all melt away and she must have instinctively wrapped her arms around Jesus in an embrace of love and joy! The impossible, the improbable, is now reality – Jesus is alive, risen from the dead, and calling Mary’s name as if nothing had changed. But it has – she must not hold onto Jesus but she must go and witness to his resurrection, becoming the first post-resurrection apostle – “one who is sent” – bearing the good news to the other apostles hiding in fear. “I have seen the Lord!” she boldly proclaims, and history has never been the same since then.

“Whom are you looking for?” It’s a good question for us to consider on this Easter morning. Whom are we looking for as we face our crushing loads in life, our disappointments, our dreams gone sour, all the things that Mary faced that day facing the tomb. And what about our own “demons” so to speak – the things of this world that oppress and discourage us or wear us out or trip us up again and again. Where are we looking for release and relief and direction? The good news is found in Mary’s experience: even BEFORE we know where to turn, Jesus calls our name and claims our devotion. We can see the resurrection today as the greatest hoax the world has known – or we can see it as the greatest source of hope for us in this life with all its complexities and needs and our only hope for life eternal in the presence of Jesus himself! Jesus calls your name and mine and invites us to open our eyes and hearts to who he truly is – the Risen Lord and Savior of the world! We can see his power at work in our lives and our world forgiving sin and transforming lives just as he did Mary Magdalene’s life. And perhaps that is the greatest testimony of all to the resurrection – when you and I can say with joy and celebration “I have seen the Lord!” AMEN.