

## 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 towards 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 round 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? For whom are you looking?’ 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.

### The Best News Ever

The first thing I’d like to say to you is how thankful I am that you are here. I really mean that, because it gives me another opportunity to help you get a better grasp on what Easter is all about. I am certain that there are some of you who were seriously considering NOT coming to church this morning – how can I be so certain? Well, because church attendance has fallen among most churches over the years, so it stands to reason that some of you are at that point.

But what’s the reason behind the ambivalence? What is the reason people have lost interest in church? I believe that there are a lot of good reasons. I’ll tell you the reasons I stopped going to church when I was in my teens; I understood so much of what Jesus taught to love others, not to judge, to serve and to forgive, and to care for what Jesus called “the least of these.” But I didn’t see those behaviors on display by many of those who went to

church. It is reasonable for someone who comes to a place where people proclaim that Jesus is their Lord to follow his teachings, and I didn't see it. To be honest, I wasn't so good at following Jesus' teachings, but I was young, and isn't it reasonable to expect that my elders would be better disciples? But I didn't see it, and so I didn't see a point in going to church.

The other reason I stopped had to do with theology. I was told I have to believe in Jesus in order to be saved, but what does that mean? What is it I'm supposed to believe, and what does that save me from? One of the worst answers I got was that I'm supposed to believe that he is the Son of God and that he rose from the dead, and if I believe that I will go to heaven when I die. That's all very nice, but does that mean that those who don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God end up going to hell? That makes God sound kinda like a shady character, and salvation sound like a gimmick. I could certainly play along, but to be honest with myself I could not believe that, nor could I believe in a God who had such strange criteria for gaining this eternal bliss called heaven. To be frank, if that is what Christianity is all about, I don't want to have anything to do with it.

So what is Easter? Is it simply about God pulling a magic trick to show us that we will have life after death if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead on that Sunday morning? Of course not! It certainly is about Jesus being alive even now, in the heart and in the mind of a Christian, but the Resurrection was more than a demonstration that our life doesn't conclude with physical death. To grasp what the Resurrection means, we have to take into account the entire ministry of Jesus.

Jesus entered a world where people lived in darkness, and by darkness I mean that they lived in fear, fear that their needs were not going to be met. The poor and the oppressed had good reason to have such fear because their needs were in fact not being met. The stronger, more powerful folks, as a rule, would take what they wanted from the poor and thus oppress them, which merely added to their fear. In Jesus day and time the Romans were at the top of the food chain doing most of the taking and oppressing, but there was plenty of taking and oppressing going on in Jesus' neck of the woods apart from the Romans. The more powerful Jewish families were taking from the poor and making them more poor, and when Rome came into power it only forced the powerful Jews to take even more from the poor. When the poor would try to rise up and say, "This is not fair," they

were squashed in a brutal way; thousands of Jews were crucified by Romans for protesting their oppression.

Enter Jesus on Palm Sunday into Jerusalem, the center of power and corruption, declaring himself king. If you want to get killed, that's exactly how you do it. But look at Jesus' life and teachings and you realize that he was not a suicidal fanatic. Jesus lived his life to show others what God's kingdom was like and how much different it was from the kingdoms of this world, the kingdoms that usually try to gain advantage over others and threaten to harm those who resist. Jesus shows us a kingdom where "the greatest among you is the one who serves the most," where "if you have two coats you give one away," where you forgive as you are forgiven, and, importantly, where you take up the cross daily and follow Jesus." The kingdom of God is one where justice flows down the mountain and sweeps away all cruelty and greed and bigotry. And it was the cruel and the greedy who sentenced Jesus to death and who tortured him miserably in the process.

So what does the Resurrection mean? It means that cruelty and greed and selfishness and fear do not win in the end. It means that love and compassion and kindness and forgiveness and patience win in the end. The Resurrection declares that Jesus is alive, that he triumphs over fear and death, and that this kingdom of God triumphs over the kingdoms of man that are driven by mutual competition for resources that lead people to kill each other and leave this world in that state of fear. When we declare, "Christ is risen," it means that goodness overcomes evil. When we declare, "Jesus is Lord," it means that we claim citizenship in the kingdom of God and not the kingdom of man.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is why the church exists. The entirety of her energy should be spent on building this kingdom of God, which means we dismantle institutions that oppress or enslave or intimidate, and we promote those that heal and forgive and serve others – in this way we are the hands of Jesus, the voice of Jesus. We work to fix a broken world, and because of the Resurrection we know that one day it will be fixed, it will be ruled by God again.

And why do we gather on Sundays? To celebrate the Resurrection! To celebrate the fact that God has won the victory over all sin and over all death. We celebrate that we have found a new life and are no longer

enslaved to the fear that places us in that power struggle to gain all the resources we can. We are freed to love rather than to compete. That's what Easter is about. Those who live this new life in Jesus Christ know this freedom. And those who live this new life in Jesus Christ have that assurance that someday the world will be fully God's, and those who live this new life in Jesus Christ know the joy that such a life and such an assurance bring.