

April 8, 2012
Questions for Lent and Easter

The Easter Question
John 20:1-18

Opening Words: This morning I end my fifteen part sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. You have heard them both on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. We have been looking at questions that either Jesus asked, or have been raised in the Gospel of John. It is important that you remember that the Gospel of John was written to a Greek thinking audience about fifty years after the resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel was written to prove to all that Jesus was the Christ (John 20:31). This is our final question: who are you looking for? Let me call this message *The Easter Question*. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, John 20:1-18.

John 20:1-18 1Early 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. 2So 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!" 3So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8Finally 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.)

10Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13They 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." 14At 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." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus 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.'" 18Mary 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.

I was looking for John Trojan. He was my father-in-law. However, I never really had the opportunity to know him. I was looking for him at the Arlington National Cemetery. That was not an easy task. Did you know there are 320,000 graves at Arlington? Each headstone is identical. He was a veteran of the Second World War and was buried there several years ago. Without the aid of modern technology, it would have been impossible to find him. However, with the help of a computer, I was given an exact location. Modern technology is a good thing. That experience leads me to this question.

Have you ever noticed how much time we spend looking for the lost? You have seen those wanted posters hanging on a telephone pole. A family is looking for their lost beagle, 'Mr. Hathaway'. Or they are looking for their lost long-haired gray cat, 'Mrs. Pickles'. You have been at a store when the public address system roars to life, "We have a little boy by the name of Larry who is looking for his mother. Larry's mother can find him at the customer service desk." Every once in a while, a senior citizen from our area will go to the store for milk and ends up in Indiana. The children are upset, but Dad seems fine. He says, "I must have made a wrong turn." Did anyone here have to find their car keys before they came to church today? When was the last time you spent valuable time looking for someone or something that got lost?

Mary Magdalene was looking for someone who is lost, Jesus. You know the story. She went to Jesus' tomb early on Sunday morning. It is so early; it is still dark. Why so early? It was the first time the law permitted anyone to touch the dead. Corpses could not be touched on the Sabbath. When she arrives, she discovers that the stone in front of the entrance had been rolled away. She is shocked by this discovery and assumes the worst. Someone had taken Jesus' body! The abuse he had endured on Friday was not enough. Now they had taken his body to continue the cruelty. She wants to find Jesus, so she enlists some help. She runs to tell two disciples that Jesus is missing. The first is Peter. The second is described as the one that Jesus loved. That is John's way of describing himself. Instantly, the two run to the tomb, and it is at this point the scripture comes to life for us.

What I want to talk about today is their reaction to the empty tomb. Each one (Mary Magdalene, Peter and John) had a different reaction to the empty tomb. They are the same reactions we have to the empty tomb today. What is your reaction to the resurrected Jesus? By the time I am done, you should be able to identify yourself. Perhaps, you will find yourself relating to Peter, a true skeptic. Perhaps, you will find yourself relating to Mary Magdalene, a seeker. I hope you find yourself relating to John, a true believer. If you are not like John, then I would encourage you to become like John. Because, his belief in the resurrection saved his soul. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

The Skeptic

The first person I want to look at in the story is Peter. What do we know about Peter? According to the Bible he was the leader of the disciples.

Time and time again, Peter finds himself in the lead. Even in the text today, he runs into the tomb without any hesitation. Along with Andrew, James and John, he is in the inner circle. Jesus gave them more attention and time. He should have been advanced in the faith but that is not the case. The last thing we have heard about Peter is that he had denied Christ three times. In today's story, he plays the role of the skeptic.

Look at the text with me. It says that when Peter got to the Jesus' tomb, he went in and saw all the burial clothes scattered. Verse ten says he does something that he must have regretted the rest of his life. What does that verse say? It says after he saw clothes scattered on the tomb's floor, he went home. He missed the whole thing because he went home. It made logical sense to go home. The problem is, the resurrection is not logical. It is a miracle that cannot be explained by science.

Do you know any skeptics? Our world is filled with skeptics. Our world has always been filled with skeptics. The story of the resurrection has always been surrounded by skeptics. Do you know how many theories exist trying to disprove the resurrection of Jesus? One theory says someone got to the tomb ahead of Mary Magdalene and stole Jesus' body. One theory says Mary Magdalene got confused and went to the wrong tomb. (You know how women are with directions.) One theory says the women confused Jesus with someone else. After all, "if you have seen one Jew, then you have seen them all". One theory says Jesus never died on the cross. Instead, he was drugged, and once his head had cleared, he simply walked out unnoticed on Saturday. Do I have to go on? We live in a skeptical world because many believe science is the final word. Miracles are dismissed because they cannot be proven. The resurrection is a miracle, but it must not have happened. There is only one problem with this line of thought.

The final word is not science; the final word is God. God is not frustrated by scientific law. God does what God desires. Part of God's plan of salvation for the world was to resurrect Jesus. Your belief in the resurrection of Jesus is not optional. It is indispensable. Without the resurrection, we have nothing. It is the one thing that separates us from the rest of the world. The resurrection of Jesus is the one thing that separates us from the rest of the world. If you believe in the resurrection, say, **"Amen!"**

The Seeker

Isidor I. Rabi won a Nobel Prize in science. A friend asked him how he became a scientist. He attributed his success to his mother. He said everyday he would arrive home from school, and his mother asked him the same question. Did you ask good questions today?" "Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist." Is there anyone here that has a question or two about the world in which we live? Does anyone here have any questions about God? Does anyone here have a question or two for God? I don't know how you can live in this world and not have a few questions for God. It appears our generation is filled seekers, people who are looking for the truth.

That is the story of our second person, Mary Magdalene. What do we know about Mary Magdalene? She owed a great deal to Jesus. According to Mark 16:9, the Master had healed her from demon possession. She had had seven demons. The number seven is significant in the Bible. It means "completeness", so she was completely possessed by demons. She would have lived out her life in a miserable state, but Jesus came to town one day. He exorcised the demons and gave her a future. She never forgot that experience, and followed Jesus for the rest of her life.

She followed Jesus to his tomb. She was going to treat his body. She thought it would be her last loving act for Jesus, but she was wrong. What does the text say? It says that after Peter and John examined the scene, they went home. What did Mary Magdalene do? We are told that she stayed at the tomb. She knew something had happened, but she didn't know what. She had been part of the great story of the resurrection, but she didn't exactly know what happened. She waited outside the tomb crying, trying to comprehend what had happened. In other words, she had a few questions.

Does anyone here have a question about the resurrection? In your mind, you understand that Jesus came back to life! However, that fact has not yet penetrated your heart. You are just like Mary Magdalene. You know something happened, but you can't comprehend the true meaning of the resurrection. Isidor I. Rabi's mother was right! Ask all the questions you want, because it is the best way to learn. Do you have any questions? Do you know anyone who is a seeker? Could it be you are a seeker? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" It is fine to be a seeker. I have a few questions myself.

The Saved

The third person I want to look at is John. What do we know about John? He may have been the most faithful to Jesus. He was in the courtyard when Jesus was interrogated and sentenced to die. He was at the foot of the cross at Jesus' crucifixion. He took on the responsibility of caring for Jesus' mother. (Remember Mary had other sons and daughters.) When Mary Magdalene reported Jesus' body was gone, he outran Peter to the tomb. Maybe it was because he was younger or more athletic? Or maybe it was that he was more excited about the possibility that Jesus had been resurrected?

The text says that when he got to the tomb he didn't go in. Peter went into the tomb first. John stayed outside. There may be several reasons. Maybe he was resting? After all, he had just been running. Or maybe he was afraid that Mary Magdalene was wrong. He didn't want to see Jesus' mangled body. Or maybe he didn't go in because he was just afraid? Roman guards could be waiting inside to arrest any Jesus supporters. He didn't go in until Peter went in first. When he went in, he discovered Mary Magdalene's account was accurate. Verse eight gives us one more piece of vital information. It says that after John examined the tomb, he believed. He remembered everything Jesus had said about his own death and resurrection.

John remembered those things and believed. His belief in the resurrected Jesus saved his very soul. Do you remember what Romans 10:9 says? *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Do you believe; do you really believe Jesus was resurrected? Do you believe; do you really believe Jesus is alive and well today? I hope so. The salvation of your very soul depends on it. And all of God's people said, **Amen!** However, there is more to the story.

In the second half of the Gospel reading, we are told Mary Magdalene is outside of the empty tomb. She is emotionally upset. Tears are running down her face, when something amazing happens. In the midst of her question, she encounters the resurrected Jesus. This is the point: while she had been looking for Jesus, Jesus had been looking for her.

Several years ago, I did something I never expected to do. I signed up for my own "Facebook" account. Social networking is extremely popular. It is like everything else. It is only bad if you use it in a bad way. It is not my preoccupation. I created my account to try to connect with people from my past. I have tried to connect with some people in my life I haven't seen in years. I have looked for people who went to high school with me. I have looked for people who went to college with me. I have looked for people who went to seminary with me. I have looked for former parishioners. I have looked for old friends and lost family members. I have to tell you, it has been great, but do you know what is better? It is even better when you discover that people have been looking for you. There is only one thing better! And that is when you discover that the resurrected Jesus is looking for you! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**