

John 20:1–10

¹Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Theological Perspective

Before they became the Bible, the stories of Scripture were lived. Unfortunately, that seems lost on many of us. Once they became cemented within the canon, they no longer smelled of the real world. The dust of ancient walking paths settled, and the sweat of an early morning run evaporated. No longer do people like Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple look anything like us, and we peer back through the pages of Scripture and see saintly figures assessing a scene with which we have become all too familiar. On the other hand, when they do resemble us, we vest them with a measure of faith that even the writers themselves insist they did not have. John tells the story of that first resurrection morning, and the portrait he paints, not unlike the works of Norman Rockwell, invites the reader to feel at home with people a lot like us.

Early in the morning, Mary of Magdala returns to the cemetery. I am reminded of words I have heard numerous times following an interment: “It will take us about an hour, and after that you are welcome to come back.” In other words, the sexton will see to it that the casket is buried, the grave covered, and the flowers neatly arranged. Protecting the family from such a painful task, he invites them to return after the scene is tidied up. In the closing verses of chapter 19, John identifies Joseph of Arimathea and

Pastoral Perspective

John’s account of the discovery of Jesus’ resurrection introduces us to a number of people, some named and some unnamed. All in their own way play their parts. Our concern here, firstly, is with two participants who are not actually present in these verses, who are removed from the garden in which the events take place, but whose influence extends over everyone else.

Our attention turns first to a reference made by Mary Magdalene in her exclamation to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved after she has run to them from the empty tomb. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” says Mary, “and we do not know where they have laid him” (v. 2b). This statement introduces us to “they,” the people who have taken him and have apparently laid him we know not where. Who are these nameless “they,” these anonymous people who so trouble Mary, even though they are physically absent from the proceedings? Are they grave robbers, who were prevalent in these times? Are they the Jewish authorities, who have heard claims that this Jesus of Nazareth would rise from the dead and have maybe taken the precaution of removing his body? Might they be the Roman authorities with concerns about the body of an insurgent, crucified because he was a threat to law and order? Who knows? Despite their influence, their identity is

Exegetical Perspective

From the heartrending events of the crucifixion and burial on Friday, John turns to the arrival of Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Sunday morning. The other three Gospels also state that Mary came to the tomb, but in each of them she is accompanied by other women. John focuses entirely on Mary, describing her early morning arrival in the darkness. As elsewhere in John, “darkness” suggests lack of understanding and unbelief. In the preceding section, John has just reminded readers that Nicodemus was the person who originally came to Jesus *by night*, a reference to unbelief and the need for light (19:39; 3:19–21). That light, of course, is Jesus himself, the “light of the world,” and those who follow him “will never walk in darkness” (8:12).

Clearly, John understands Mary Magdalene’s arrival in darkness as a sign that she did not yet understand that Jesus was to rise from the dead. She discovered that the stone had been rolled away, but whether or not she looked into the tomb is not stated. Openings to tombs were only about three feet high, and Mary would have had to stoop and crawl to get inside. Probably, in the darkness, the removal of the stone was sufficient for her to conclude that Jesus’ body had been stolen—a likely assumption, since grave robbery was frequent—or Jesus’ enemies had removed the body. Whatever

Homiletical Perspective

On the highest and holiest day of the church year—which is when we most frequently preach on this passage—the problem is that we have already preached it so many times. What congregant has not heard this text? Even those who come just on Easter day! What preacher has not at least thought, this year I will proclaim the resurrection from the perspective of the stone or the linen wrappings? “Familiarity breeds contempt,” goes the old saying. In this case, familiarity can breed daydreaming or naps on the part of the congregation. It is not that the text is not powerful; it is. It is not that the text has nothing to say, because it does. It is that the text itself calls us to do more than just believe certain things. This text calls us to become a particular kind of people.

Years ago, when I was coaching my son’s baseball team, there was a young man on that team who really struggled with the game. His throws were wild. He could never hit the ball. Catching anything was out of the question. I tried to work with him on skills, confidence, and strategy. Nothing worked. His parents loved to see him out there trying, but he was losing heart fast. The other kids tried, but over time they became less than kind. One afternoon at practice one of the kids yelled at this young man, “What’s the matter with you? Can’t you see?!” Suddenly it dawned on me: he cannot see. After a conversation

John 20:1–10

Theological Perspective

Nicodemus as the ones who buried Jesus and tended to his body.

Mystery shrouds the absence of Jesus' closest friends, and I wonder how Mary felt when she learned who claimed his body. No doubt, Mary's own suspicions are roused as word of them spreads. The Sanhedrin? Pilate released Jesus' body to members of the Sanhedrin? Now, upon her return, some of her worst fears are confirmed.

As Mary approaches the tomb, nothing is tidied up. In fact, the seal has been broken and the stone rolled back, but Jesus is nowhere to be found. "They!" she exclaims. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb!" (v. 2b). Among the people "they" may suggest, surely Nicodemus and Joseph top the list. The Sanhedrin, the very ones who wanted Jesus dead, took "responsibility" for giving him a dignified burial. They saw that his body would neither fall prey to wild animals nor be lost among the nameless others buried by the Roman guard. They saw to it, all right! He is gone! She has no idea where!

Though Jesus prepared the disciples for this moment by prophesying his death and resurrection, it looks different at the mouth of an empty tomb. The disciples never imagined abandoning Jesus. Some even vowed to die with him, and they surely never dreamed of the enemy taking possession of his body, to do with as they pleased. A fundamental trust has been violated, and Mary rushes for help.

Upon hearing the news, the Beloved Disciple and Peter race to the tomb to confirm Mary's horrible story, and in the process of inspiration, the Holy Spirit has retained some very human elements. On occasion, the reader has overheard the disciples discussing who is the greatest, and it echoed at least a measure of kingdom concerns. Here, though, the Beloved Disciple describes the ferocious dash, and he assures the reader that *he* got there first! Unashamedly, he highlights his athletic prowess three times, twice in verse 4 and again in verse 8. Unbelievable! Yet, thanks be to God!

A chasm develops between the reader and biblical characters when one forgets that Jesus alone is the incarnate God. Though we know better, for all practical purposes, we elevate other faithful people to similar status. While the earliest disciples serve as matriarchs and patriarchs of Christian faith and form the foundational layer of the "spiritual household," they, along with every other believer, are "living stones" among other living stones. They are not the "cornerstone" (1 Pet. 2:5), and the divine power that stirs them enlivens every other believer as well. As

Pastoral Perspective

vague, their profile blurred. The "they" are necessarily ill-defined and obscure, pitted against the helpless "we," who do not know where he has been laid (v. 2).

The philosopher Martin Heidegger writes of what he calls "the They" in his discussion of what he calls "inauthentic existence," by which he means living that is diminished by anxiety and by an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for our lives.¹ For Heidegger, "the They" represent the faceless, impersonal powers at work in the world that dictate and constrain human life by robbing us of initiative and decision. So we might say that "they have closed the road for repairs," and we are not quite sure exactly who has closed the road, but we have a vague sense of influential powers that impinge upon our world. We might say, "They have to put an end to gun crime!" placing responsibility for stopping this evil onto some unnamed authority out there.

It was "the They" who were at work in Jesus' trial and death, stirring up public opinion against him, and now it is "the They" who have apparently decreed that Jesus' body must be removed for whatever reason. A world dominated by "the They" is one in which we are forever at the mercy of powers and authorities beyond us—often colluding with them—and never in full control of our own destiny. We encounter "the They" in the novels of Franz Kafka and in George Orwell's *1984*. In this passage "the They" are casting their influence over Mary and doubtless the other disciples too.

At the opposite extreme, however, is someone else who is very much present, but only in his absence—at least for now. This is Jesus. We are drawn to verses 6–7, where Peter enters the tomb and finds only the linen wrappings and the napkin for Jesus' head neatly rolled up. The contrast here is with Lazarus, who in John 11 emerges from his tomb still wrapped in his graveclothes, the trappings of death still binding him. He has cheated death only for a spell; it will return in due course to reclaim him.

Jesus, however, is gloriously free from the grave. The discarded graveclothes and folded napkin signify not only that his body has not been stolen by grave robbers, but that he is utterly sovereign over death. The trappings of death are tidied and put in their place. This is completely consistent with John's portrayal of Jesus throughout his death, burial, and resurrection. This is the regal Jesus, in total command of his destiny, imperial and in total opposition to "the They." "They" will not consign him to a tomb.

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 163.

Exegetical Perspective

she thought, she rushed back to tell the disciples of her discovery.

John intensifies the narrative by switching from past to present tense here. Mary literally “comes to the tomb,” “sees the stone,” and “runs and comes to Peter and the Beloved Disciple.” Use of the present tense serves to heighten the sense of urgency as Mary Magdalene hurries to share her grief and anxiety with the disciples. Her outcry, “*We do not know*” where the body has been laid (v. 2), is a reminder of John’s use of earlier sources in the composition of this Gospel. Mary also calls Jesus “the Lord,” the first time this title occurs in John. It will be used frequently in the remainder of the Gospel. After making her report, Mary drops out of sight as John turns his attention to Peter and the Beloved Disciple. She will reappear in the next section, when John records her meeting with the risen Lord.

In Peter’s last appearance in this Gospel, he was denying Jesus in the high priest’s courtyard (18:15–18, 25–27). Now he resurfaces in the narrative, along with “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Without doubt this is John, the one to whom this entire Gospel is attributed. John does not say whether any other disciples were present. Rather, as with Mary Magdalene and as in other accounts in the Gospel, John focuses entirely on the person of interest. In this case, his attention focuses on two: Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

By the time this Gospel was written, early Christian communities acknowledged Peter as the leader of the apostles. Still, the Johannine community also revered John, and their loyalty surfaces in the description of these events. The Beloved Disciple outran Peter, but then hesitated, waiting outside the tomb. Then Peter arrived, “following him” (v. 6). The term “follow,” as a call to faith and discipleship, is often significant in John (e.g., 8:12), and it is sometimes suggested that here the term aims to give precedence to the Beloved Disciple. It seems just as likely, though, that the term simply turns attention to the arrival of Peter, who in typical fashion rushed right into the tomb.

The Beloved Disciple had already noticed the graveclothes when he peered into the tomb, but now Peter saw that the body wrappings were still in place, with the head covering lying separately. While Peter considered the meaning of this, the Beloved Disciple also entered the tomb. John says matter-of-factly that “he saw and believed.” Apparently recognizing that robbers would not waste time removing the graveclothes, the Beloved Disciple concluded that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Homiletical Perspective

with his parents, one where we all owned up to our embarrassment that we had missed the obvious signs, his parents took him to get glasses. That was the day everything changed. Suddenly, or at least in a short amount of time, nothing got by him. His throws were dead on target. He could hit the ball. Being able to see matters.

Resurrection is so many things, and it also cures myopia of the soul. It is only with the perspective of the resurrection correcting our marred vision that we can see the kind of kingdom God has in mind. Anyone who has really read the stories of our faith has thought this is crazy. Those who have never had that thought have never weighed the implications of Jesus’ teachings, his parables, his resurrection. Perhaps it would help if we started our worship and Scripture reading with the words, “I know this sounds crazy, but . . .”

Telling in our passage is the second last verse: “for as yet they did not understand” (v. 9a). Not one of the disciples came to the tomb expecting resurrection. No one was giddy with excitement to see if Jesus was “still” there, if it had happened yet or not. Their assumption upon seeing the stone was that an assault from the outside had happened; someone had stolen the body. Even when the disciples arrived, their vision was so out of focus that for whatever reason they did not even recognize Jesus himself! Consider the participants in the story.

Mary Magdalene is not portrayed as looking inside the tomb. With the stone rolled away, she made what would be a typical assumption. Someone else had rolled the stone away to do something with the body of Jesus. That Jesus was buried was in and of itself no small thing. Vandals and others who were crucified were not always buried, in order to warn others not to commit similar acts. Jesus and his followers had no means to purchase a space, so the fact that Joseph and Nicodemus came forward to care for the body was a miracle in itself. In the midst of her own grief Mary made the mistake of assuming the worst. For her, resurrection was the last thing on her mind.

Simon Peter learned the tomb was empty from Mary. For Jesus’ entire ministry Peter had been the one to make the brash claims, to speak for the other disciples, but not in this case. Mary informed him of what she had seen, probably describing her worst fears come true. Running to the tomb, Peter was outrun by another disciple but was the first to enter the tomb itself. Perhaps he was speechless. In this instance we get no proclamation from Peter. Only silence.

John 20:1–10

Theological Perspective

trivial as this emphasis on the footrace between the Beloved Disciple and Peter may seem, the profundity of its inclusion in Scripture levels the ground upon which disciples in every age travel the way of faith.

This story is about the resurrection, but even the biblical witness is seasoned with somewhat embarrassing human concerns. Take note, and by no means explain it away. Faith happens here, amid the honorable and the dishonorable. Does it matter who arrived first? Maybe not, but the God-breathed witness includes the Beloved Disciple's adolescent ambitions and now invites the reader to wonder: If him, why not me? If those who first experienced Jesus' love behaved like this and, even proudly, asserted themselves over against others, maybe the Way can find me as well. Though a disciple would wish otherwise, humiliating actions and attitudes creep out, and some even find their way to the pages of Scripture. Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit apparently is not repulsed, but continues the redemptive program precisely in the midst of such humanness.

Finally, though, the Beloved Disciple arrived at the tomb first; he and Peter both personally confirmed what Mary had been saying. Jesus was gone! The large stone had been rolled away, as if to display the contents. Strips of linen, a burial cloth, but no corpse. As if someone really had taken his body, the cave stood empty, shouting a message no one seemed to understand (v. 9). What the text does say is that the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed" (v. 9). Maybe he believed Mary, nothing more, nothing less. "They have taken the Lord!" she shouted, and now with his own eyes he saw and believed. The tomb was empty, and no one knew where he was. Is this not, though, where faith begins: at the empty tomb? Come and see for yourselves, and listen closely to the message it proclaims.

SEAN WHITE

Pastoral Perspective

"They" will not constrain him with grave wrappings. "They" will not prevent his rising, for he is in control. Jesus defies "the They."

At opposite extremes in this narrative we have "the They" and Jesus, both present in their absence. What of the other participants in the story? What of Mary, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple? They are betwixt and between. Look at them running: Mary running to Peter and the other disciple, and Peter and the Beloved Disciple then running to the tomb. What kind of running is this? These disciples are stirred by what they have heard and seen, and this is the running of confusion, of bewilderment, of hope, of fear, of desperation, of longing. Above all, this is running away from "the They" and toward Jesus.

As we watch, we see that these disciples are in different places. Mary is bewildered, grief-stricken, as the verses that follow will further demonstrate. Peter is inquisitive, entering the tomb first, impulsive, searching. The Beloved Disciple sees and believes, even though he cannot yet understand. They are at different stages of faith, but all of them will feature in the remainder of John's Gospel, each in his or her own way being commissioned for service and testimony, each being entrusted with responsibility and initiative. Their running is muddled and uncertain, but it is taking them from inauthentic living dominated by "the They" to the new, risen life with Jesus.

So to today. In our contemporary, secular, post-Christian world, God is evidently a delusion. Religion is a symptom of humanity's infancy that must be discarded. The church has had its day and is finished. Science has disproved and displaced religion. The resurrection could not possibly have happened. Some things can never change. So "they" say. We Christians are sometimes confused, sometimes uncertain, sometimes believing, and sometimes struggling. We too are betwixt and between, like these disciples. The summons to faith, however, means defiance of "the They," as we are drawn to the sovereign, regal, risen Christ.

LANCE STONE