

Sermon: The Invitation of Easter

Year C, Easter

[Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18; Luke 24:1-12](#)

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Mary knows what she's looking for. She looking for a dead body. Not just any dead body, but the body of her friend and teacher. She's been with him since the beginning of his work, since he began talking about the kingdom of God. She's one of the women who underwrote this whole enterprise and kept Jesus and the rest of the disciples on the road, able to focus on proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom instead of back in the carpenter's shop and out in the fishing boats.¹

Mary Magdalene is a woman of the world. She knows *exactly* what people are like. So when she comes to the tomb on that first Easter morning and saw the rock had been removed from the tomb (John 20:1), she knew what had happened. Jesus had been killed to make a point, to prove that standing up to the powers that be in this world will get you dead. And as if that wasn't enough, he hadn't been dead for more than 48 hours when they, whomever "they" were, had taken his body. Who knows why? It doesn't even matter. She just wanted him to be allowed to rest in peace. And until she could track down his body and put it back where it belonged, and get someone to roll the ginormous stone back into place, she wasn't going to stop looking for him.

Mary knows *exactly* what people are like. They're foolish and weak and mean and cowardly. She knows *exactly* what the world is like. Children die after a few days (Isaiah 65:20) when it's completely unnecessary. Children are born for calamities (Isaiah 65:23) like fentanyl and no one seems to be able to do anything about it. Old people don't make it past 100 (Isaiah 65:20) even though with love and attention so many more could. People spend their whole lives building up equity in their homes or seniority at their jobs (Isaiah 65:22) and in a few months it can all be taken away when the plant closes or someone's health care doesn't cover what they thought it did. They lose what they've built and someone else reaps the benefits of everything they spent their whole lives working toward (Isaiah 65:22). Mary knows.

So when she finds the empty tomb, she can't be surprised. It's just so *typical*. She's grieving for her friend and teacher. Especially because he was the one who was talking about how it could be different. He was the one who healed all those people and fed everyone and made them feel like they could stand up to the powers that be. So of course she's weeping.

And we're weeping with her. Because she's right. People are foolish and weak and mean and cowardly. We've worn the labels off our car radio power buttons because an angry jab is the quickest way to keep *that nonsense* out of our ears. Pick your thing. Declining moral standards. Rising global temperatures. 17 items in the 12 items or less line. People are just that way. And you know how you know? You look for it. And you see it everywhere you look.

But there's something that's building on that first Easter morning. Mary goes and tells the disciples that someone had taken Jesus' body out of the tomb and no one knew where they had laid him. (John 20:2) So Peter and the other disciple, the one that Jesus loved, go and take a

¹ Gregory A. Robbins, "Easter Vigil, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 24:1-12" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 349.

look. And Peter checks it out, doesn't say anything, and goes home. It seems he's in agreement with Mary. Jesus' body is missing and no one knows where it is. But that other disciple, the one that Jesus loved, he sees and he believes (John 20:8). It's not exactly clear what he sees, but it doesn't make sense that someone would take a dead body and leave the clothes it was wrapped in. You'd take both. So, he may have seen those and realized there was something else going on.² Whatever it was he saw, and however he interpreted it, Mary doesn't see it.

Mary looks in again and sees two angels who ask her why she's weeping and she tells them exactly why (John 20:13). And somehow she misses that she's talking to angels. We all get that. We have all had days when we're flat out running to get home from work and through the grocery and get supper into the oven that we could walk past a forest fire on our way to the car and think "I will get to that later." We get fixated on our current mission, our current objective, and nothing, not angels, not linen wrappings, is going to make a dent in what we're doing.

Then Mary meets Jesus, although she thinks he's the gardener. He asks her why she's weeping and who she's looking for (John 20:15). She tries to cut a deal with him. "Just tell me where the body is and I won't turn you in. No harm, no foul."³ And then he calls her by name. "Mary" he says. And her whole world comes to a stop.

She reaches out to him, presumably to give him a hug, to be taken into his arms, to be reassured that this horrible morning of running around is over. But he warns her "Don't hold onto me" (John 20:17), and maybe a better translation would be "Don't cling to me."⁴ He's right, because we've been in Mary's shoes often enough. We *would* rather keep him with us where we are rather than let him take us where he is going.⁵

It's frightening to go where he is going. He is going to *the new heavens and a new earth* (Isaiah 65:17), where *the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind* (Isaiah 65:17). He is going where *the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox* (Isaiah 65:25). Before we call, God will answer, while we are yet speaking God will hear (Isaiah 65:24). We aren't prepared for that. That's not the world we know how to navigate, where people are foolish and weak and mean and cowardly. We don't know what to do when we expect a sealed tomb and find one filled with angels, when we hunt the past and discover the future, when we seek a corpse and find the risen Lord.⁶

The world we know how to navigate, no matter how broken and disappointing it is, is not where Jesus is going. Jesus is going to God. And he's taking the whole world with him.⁷ The world we know how to navigate has been rolled away. On Easter morning, God has planted a seed of

² Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi) Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 29A of *The Anchor Bible*, eds. William Foxwell Allbright & David Noel Freedman, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1970): 1008.

³ Anna Carter Florence, "Resurrection of the Lord," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 55.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi) Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 29A of *The Anchor Bible*, eds. William Foxwell Allbright & David Noel Freedman, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1970): 922.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Unnatural Truth." *The Christian Century* 113, no. 10 [1996]: 325.

⁶ Taylor, 325.

⁷ Taylor, 325.

life in us that cannot be killed, and if we can remember that, then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.⁸

That's where Jesus is headed and where he's inviting us to go. And God bless her, Mary steps right up. I'm not sure I could have done it. I'm not sure I could have set aside everything I knew to be true and accepted Jesus' invitation. In that moment. Right there. With my sleeves still wet from wiping my eyes and nose from crying. With the rage still echoing in my body about the Slytherins who couldn't let my friend and teacher's body just lie in peace. But Mary does it.

And not only does she accept the invitation. But she turns around, and goes back to the disciples and says "I have seen the Lord." (John 20:18) She accepts Jesus' invitation and extends it to other people. They spend more time with Jesus and every time he came to his friends they became less weak, less foolish, less mean, less cowardly. Being with Jesus made them stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him.⁹ That place he was going to became more and more real. And the broken and disappointing world that we humans have so diligently made together began to fall away.

That is the invitation of Easter. Don't cling to Jesus and try to keep him pinned down in this world. Let him grab ahold of you and bring you to where he is going. To his Father and our Father, to his God and our God. (John 20:17). That is the invitation of Easter and it is the invitation we have been asked to share with our brothers and sisters. We may be afraid, be unsure of how to get there, but we will get there together, with Jesus, all the way to God's holy mountain, where none shall hurt or destroy. (Isaiah 65:25) That is the invitation of Easter Mary was offered then and we are offered now. We just need to accept, because we have seen the Lord.

⁸ Taylor, 325.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Escape from the Tomb." *The Christian Century* 115, no. 10 [1998]: 339.