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John 20:1-18

When I was growing up my family always went to Easter Sunrise service. I have fond memories of that. The service started at 6:00 AM which means my morning started at 5:15 with my mother frantically pounding on my bedroom door. I grew up in a large family, seven kids and so at 5:15 my mom would be frantically pounding on everyone's door. It usually took more than one pounding on the door and so she would do this at 3 minute intervals until everyone was up. And the phrase that she would yell over and over again was "Quick dip! Quick dip!" which was her way of saying, "Take a shower really really fast! Just get your hair wet!" It's hard for me to describe the chaos that went on in my house to try to get everyone to church by 6 AM. But once we all barreled into church and everything settled down I always enjoyed Easter sunrise service. The exhaustion of Easter Sunday hadn't set in yet. That would come and will come between 1 and 2 this afternoon, but for that hour of Easter sunrise you could just go to the empty tomb. So this morning let's just relax and go to the empty tomb. This morning let's go to the empty tomb with John's head and with Mary's heart.

First, John's head. The passage says, "**Early 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. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.**" The disciple Jesus loved is John. John had a very special relationship with Jesus. We can tell from his Gospel that he was a very contemplative person. He liked to think about things, So it's a good thing to go to the empty tomb with John's head.

**So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.** John saw strips of linen lying there. That's going to be important in a minute.

**Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.** John saw the strips of linen and believed.

Now sometimes when we talk about belief we talk about belief as something that is separate from your head. We say, "I can't prove it I just believe it in my heart." And that's true to a certain extent. Later in this same book of John Jesus is going to say to doubting Thomas, "You believe because you have seen, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And finally, the only reason anyone comes to faith in the resurrection is because of the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.'" All of that is true. But at the same time faith isn't completely divorced from evidence. Faith isn't completely divorced from your head. In fact when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, I think unbelief is less plausible. All the other explanations for the empty tomb are less plausible than that he really did rise from the dead.

Think about it, just with your head. What are the other explanations? Well, the explanation Mary jumped to was, somebody stole the body, it was a robbery. But what evidence did John and Peter find at the crime scene. The strips of linen lying there. **He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.** No think about this with your brain, if someone came and stole the body would they take the time to unwrap the body and fold up the linens separately from the head-wrapping? Of course not! Imagine that burglars break into your house and they are ransacking your house. They take your TV. They've going through your drawers looking for stashes of money or jewelry. And then they notice that your bed's not made and they stop and say, "How can these people live like this? These people don't make their bed!" So they stop their ransacking and very carefully make your bed. Is it plausible that they would do that? No! But the strips of linen were lying there folded up nicely separate from the head-wrapping.

And remember also that there were guards guarding the tomb. What was their explanation? There explanation was we fell asleep and the disciples stole the body. Will that stand up to cross examination? So you all nodded off. And the grinding sound of stone against stone didn't wake any of you up? Is that really plausible?

But now someone might say, “Well the stories in the Bible are just made up.” But here’s a historical fact: Christianity was a movement that exploded. And the main claim of all the early founders of Christianity was that Jesus rose from the dead. The book of Acts has tons and tons of sermons and the main point of every sermon is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Now don’t you think that the movement could have been squashed pretty easily if the Sanhedrin would have just produced a body. There’s a Christian historian named NT Wright and he insists that the only way to explain the rapid rise of early Christianity and the shape that the movement took as a resurrection movement, the only way to explain that is if the tomb really was empty on Easter Sunday morning.

Plus there were eyewitnesses of the Risen Jesus. Paul says in 1 Cor 15 that there are over 500 eyewitnesses, some of whom are dead, but most of them Paul says are still alive and you can go ask them if you want to and they’ll tell you that they saw Jesus risen from the dead.

It still requires faith, it still requires the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit to believe, but unbelief is less plausible than most people think. So let’s come to the empty tomb with John’s head. But let’s also come with Mary’s heart. You can really see Mary’s heart in this passage, you can see her love for Jesus. She’s overcome with grief she’s crying.

**At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, “Woman, 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.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). 17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.**

Now why would Jesus say to Mary, “Don’t hold onto me?” Well, when we hold on to someone really tight, it’s usually because we think we are going to lose them. For example, if you’re a dad and you are going on a business trip for a few weeks. Your kids are usually content to just be in the room with you, but when you are out the door to leave, they are hanging onto your feet screaming, “Dady don’t go!” We usually hang onto something when we think we are going to lose it and that’s what Mary is doing here, She’s holding onto Jesus because she thinks that she’s going to lose him again. But Jesus says, “You don’t need to worry about ever losing me again.”

But you might say to me, “Pastor, of course she’s going to lose Jesus again. He says in the very same sentence, ‘For I have not yet ascended to the Father.’” Of course he’s going away again, he’s going to ascend! But is the ascension, Jesus going far far away? In a sense he does go away in the ascension. We don’t see Jesus anymore. Jesus says, **“In my Father’s house are many rooms, I am going there to prepare a place for you.”** So in a sense Jesus went away in the ascension. But in a greater sense Jesus never went away. The book of Ephesians says that Jesus ascended so that he might fill all things. What did he say in Matthew’s Gospel, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them.” And he said at the end of Matthew, “I am with you always.” Jesus says to the heart of Mary, “You don’t have to clutch me, because when I ascend I will fill all things and I will be with you and I will send my Spirit and when I ascend I will come back and take you to be with me where I am and you will never lose me again.”

There’s a lot in this passage that really sticks with you, what I want you to take home is this question, “Why are you crying?” There will be plenty of occasions in this life to cry, there will be plenty of occasions to be sad. I’m not saying it’s wrong to cry or be sad. But at the end of the day we can always ask ourselves, “Why are you crying?”

Imagine that the Packer game was on but you had to work. And so you DVRed it. And it’s late at night when you get home but you want to watch the Packer game. And of course you worked really really hard to not know how it turned out. You didn’t listen to the radio on the way home, you didn’t check facebook, everyone you saw you said, “Don’t tell me what happens in the game.” And you get home and you’re sitting on the couch and you turn on the DVR and then your friend comes to the door and says, “Can you believe the Packers won on a last minute field goal! The Packers were down 28 points. It was the greatest comeback in NFL history!” And you of course want to strangle your friend. But just for fun you sit down and watch the game with him anyway. And as the other team scores again and again you start to get really mad. And your friends says, “What are you getting mad for? You know that they are going to win.” There will be plenty of times on this earth when we will be sad, but because of easter, we know that we are going to win.

Jesus is alive and we will never lose him again. Amen.