

Pastor Daniel Waldschmidt – John 20:1-18 – Easter Sunrise – St. John’s – 4/4/2021

My Grandma Waldschmidt had Alzheimer’s. That’s the disease where you forget things. I’m no expert on Alzheimer’s, but I would think that if you have Alzheimer’s you would have a hard time understanding all of the things that come at you every day.

For example, imagine if you don’t remember who anybody is, but people keep coming up to you and talking to you as if you should know them. So people with Alzheimer’s get good at pretending. But inside they must just feel lost. They don’t know who anybody is. They don’t know where they are. They can’t understand or explain what is happening to them.

We don’t have Alzheimer’s. But do you ever just feel lost? Do you ever feel like you can’t understand or explain all the things that are coming at you? Do you ever find yourself wondering, “Why would God let this happen to me?” Sometimes we have a hard time understanding and finding an explanation for the things that happen to us.

In our passage for today, we see that Mary Magdalena was having a hard time explaining the things that were happening to her. She was someone who had faced difficulties in her life before. The Gospel of Luke says that seven demons had been driven out of her (Luke 8:2). But she had found the solution to that in Jesus. Jesus had driven all seven of those demons out of her. She had followed Jesus from Galilee listening to his teaching. She calls him “Teacher” in our passage (John 20:16). She had come to believe in Jesus as her Lord (John 20:13, 16). Even after Jesus was dead she still calls him “the Lord” (20:12) and “my Lord” (20:16). But Jesus had died. Even though Jesus had clearly had clearly taught them about his death, the death of Jesus was probably still an event that at this time Mary had a difficult time understanding. It was surely an event that made her very sad. And she goes to the tomb early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, and she sees that the stone had been removed from the entrance of the tomb (20:1).

She gives an explanation for what has happened, but that explanation is not correct. She runs back to the disciples and she says, **“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him” (John 20:1).** Mary saw the stone removed from the entrance, and she *assumed* that someone had stolen the body.

Does it ever happen to us that sometimes we assume an explanation that’s not actually the correct one? Maybe something bad happens to us and we assume, “God doesn’t love me anymore.” Or we might even start to assume, “Maybe there isn’t a God.” Maybe right now you find yourself in a place similar to Mary Magdalene. If you are, I think you can find in Mary Magdalene someone who can sympathize with you. And I think you can find in Mary Magdalene the good news that maybe the conclusion that I assumed is actually not correct. In the case of Mary Magdalene, the truth was actually much better than her assumption.

Wouldn’t it have been sad if Mary would have gone through her whole life thinking that people had stolen Jesus’ body? It would have been especially sad because the truth is actually so much better!

Don't go through life assuming that God doesn't love you or that there isn't a God. As Mary found out, the truth is so much better.

When Peter and John heard what Mary said, they went running to the tomb. There they saw evidence that throws doubt on the grave robber explanation. The grave clothes were lying there. And the covering that was over Jesus' head was folded up separate from the linen. That wasn't necessarily consistent with a grave robbery. Why would the robbers fold up the head piece? But this is all crashing down on Mary. She doesn't have a chance to think it through and reflect on it. She's just overwhelmed and crying. The disciples go back to where they were staying but Mary stays at the tomb crying. She bends down to look into the tomb and there she sees two angels in white. And wouldn't you think that the angels would say to Mary, like they said to the other women, "The Lord is not here. He is risen" (See for example, Matthew 28:6) But instead of just saying, "He is risen!" The angels ask her a question, "Why are you crying?" (John 20:13). And she repeats her wrong explanation, **"They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).**

And then she turns around and she sees Jesus. But she doesn't recognize that it is Jesus. And again we might expect Jesus to say right away, "It's me!" But instead he asks her two questions, **"Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" (John 20:15)** Why do the angels and Jesus ask questions? Why don't they just tell Mary? Mary is having a hard time understanding and explaining what is happening to her. Why don't the angels and Jesus just explain it to her? Why do they ask her questions instead? I suppose the benefit of asking questions is that requires the person to think for themselves.

Sometimes God lets us struggle with things. And that makes our faith stronger. Sometimes God lets us struggle with things and he gives us what we need for that struggle. He gives us the Scripture. John says in verse 9, **"They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."** Scripture doesn't give us an explanation for specific things in our lives. But it does give us everything we need to know. It comforts us. It gives us God's commands. And it points us to Jesus.

Mary turned around and saw Jesus. But she made another wrong assumption. She thought he was the gardener. Sometimes we have the wrong explanations for things. And it's OK that I don't have all the explanations. It's OK because my Good Shepherd has everything in his hands. It's OK because my Good Shepherd knows my name. It's been well said that in connection with this story that Jesus knows his own sheep by name, and so it's fitting that Jesus causes Mary to recognize him by saying, "Mary." And just like that all of the wrong explanations went away. Just like that all the wrong explanation were replaced by the truth. And the truth is Jesus.

My Grandma Waldschmidt is in heaven now. About a month ago I came across a copy of the funeral sermon that I preached for her. It reminded me of a story that my dad had told me. In her dementia, she thought that her parents were still alive. And my grandpa would tell her, "No your parents died a long time ago, they are in heaven now." It was important that he convince her of this because she kept wanting to go back to her home town of Reedsville. And so he showed her the funeral bulletin for her mother. Well one time she was reading that funeral bulletin and she read the line in the obituary, **"Esther was preceded in death by her husband, Otto Meartz."** Otto Maertz was her dad. She read

that. And she crossed it out. And wrote "No, my dad is alive." I ended the funeral sermon by saying, "Yes, grandma. Because of Jesus he is alive. And so are you."

Alzheimer's can be hereditary. So the possibility exists that I'll get Alzheimer's some day. As I was preparing for this sermon I thought that I should write down on a piece of paper, "My Jesus is alive!" So if I get Alzheimer's at least I know that that's true. There are some many things in our lives that come at us that we just can't explain, but "My Jesus is alive." I can't explain everything in my life but I know that my Jesus is alive. That is the compass that points me North. That is the true statement by which I explain everything else.

Mary wanted to hold on to Jesus. But Jesus said, "**Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father**" (John 20:17). What was Jesus ascending to the Father to do? He told his disciples in John 14, "In my Father's house are many rooms. ... I am going there to prepare a place for you." And now the Father is not just Jesus' Father. God is also your Father. Jesus says, "**Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'**" (John 20:17)

When Mary said, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him," Mary thought that she had lost everything. But that explanation was wrong too. Jesus had told his disciples in John 16, "You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy ... And no one will take away your joy" (16:20, 22). My Jesus is alive, and because of that I have forgiveness. My Jesus is alive, and because of that I have heaven. My Jesus is alive, and no one can take that away. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Amen.