

The Stone Has Been Rolled Away!

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Hear the story taken from John, chapter 20, beginning with verse 1.

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. So 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!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They 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." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "Why are you crying? Who are you 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."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher.) Jesus 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.'"

Mary 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.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

It is just fitting that the women be rewarded with the first glimpse of the empty tomb. They were the last at the cross, the last at the grave, and the first at the empty tomb. In our story, Mary Magdalene plays the main role. In all of the gospel accounts of the resurrection, Mary plays an important role. No one loved Jesus more than Mary Magdalene did. Scriptures say that she had been forgiven of many sins. Church legend says she was a prostitute. However, that is not in Scripture. All we know is that she had been forgiven much and she loved much. It was the custom to visit the tomb of a loved one for three days after they died. The Jewish people believed that the spirit of the deceased hovered around the body, seeking to get back in, and that they were aware of the people who visited. And so it was important to go and make sure that your loved one knew that you cared. Now, I'm gonna go all Southern on you for a moment. I want

you to drive down a peg and hold on. We'll be back here to our story in just a moment. This is a commercial.

Sometimes the spirit got back in the body. Some of you just went, "What?" Well, modern medicine tells us, and modern archaeologists confirm, that sometimes people were buried in haste and they weren't dead. They were in a deep coma and people just thought they were dead. And so Jewish burial practices were to wrap the body in linen and spices but not to cover the face with the wrappings. They would take a common household napkin and place it over the face so that if the dead person got back in their body, they could call out. I'm serious. Now, that's part of the story. Here's the rest of the story. This is the Paul Harvey, for those of you who remember Paul: Jewish dinner etiquette. It sounds like I'm going down a rabbit hole, but I'm not. If I am finished with my meal, I wad up my napkin and I put it on my plate so the person clearing the table would know, "No más, I'm done," whether I'm there or not. That says, "Don't ask me if I want any more. I'm finished." But if I had to leave the table, but I was coming back to finish my meal, I would take my napkin, fold it neatly and lay it off by itself by my plate. That way the host knew I would be right back. When the disciples went to the empty tomb, they found the wrappings that Jesus was wrapped in wadded up and laying over to the side. But the napkin that was over his face was folded up neatly, laying off by itself. Jesus was saying, "I'll be right back!" Isn't that cool?

So, the women find the tomb empty. They run and they tell the disciples that he's gone. The disciples go and find the tomb empty, just as the women said, but they missed the clue. They return home but Mary, in her deep grief, remains behind. I can only imagine what was going through her mind. She probably thought, "Not only have they killed him, now they have stolen his body to inflict more humiliation and degradation." And she cried. But because of her great devotion, she was rewarded with the first glimpse of the risen Lord. She looked in the tomb and there were two men there, two angels, one at the head and one at the foot of where Jesus had laid. And they asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" and she said, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him." And she turns around and she sees Jesus, but she doesn't know it's Jesus.

Now, anytime I do a Bible study on this passage, I always get asked the question, "Why didn't Mary, who loved Jesus so thoroughly, recognize him when she saw him?" There's any number of reasons. Maybe there were so many tears in her eyes she couldn't recognize him. After all, later that day, Jesus walked with the people that were going to Emmaus for several hours. He walked with them and talked with them and they didn't recognize him. Maybe it is the context. She went to see a dead man. She didn't expect a risen Savior. It happens to me all the time. People see me away from church and they have no clue who I am. A number of years ago I was at C.J. Strike Reservoir, right outside of Boise, Idaho, fishing, and I went to the fish cleaning station. There was one of my guys on the other side cleaning his catch and I started cleaning my catch. And I said, "Hey, man, looks like you had a great morning!" He said, "Yeah," and we talked for about five to seven minutes. After a while he said, "You act like you know me!" I said, "I should. I've been your pastor for eight years!" So, there's a context. She didn't recognize him.

Now, listen to me. If you have been dead for three days, you are either ticked off or you got a sense of humor. And the Jesus that I serve had a sense of humor. He says, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. Now, I want you to listen to her response. This is love talking. She said, "Sir, if you have moved him, tell me where. Tell me where you put him and I'll go get him." What's she gonna do with a dead body? You see, for her it didn't matter. She didn't care. She said, "I'll figure it out. Just tell me where he's at." At this point Jesus lets her off the hook with a single word, "Mary," and there is a flood of recognition that comes over her and she knows that he is alive.

The question that Jesus asked Mary that first Easter morning is the same question Jesus is asking us today. "Who are you looking for?" The stone was rolled away so that Mary could get in, not so Jesus could get out. The stone was rolled away so she could see the reality of the resurrection. The stone was rolled away to show that Jesus wasn't just another tragic figure in a long line of tragic figures among the Jewish people. The stone was rolled away so we can see that all that Jesus taught, all that he was, was authentic and worthy of full acceptance. "Who are you looking for?" The people of Jesus' day didn't recognize him because he wasn't what they expected and he wasn't what they wanted. How dare God not give us what we want? How dare God not fulfill our expectations? They wanted a John Wayne Messiah that would saddle in and take care of all of their enemies. For a lack of a better way of saying it, they wanted a Sugar Daddy Messiah that would take care of all their wants. And what they got was a Messiah that suffered and bled and died and rose from the dead to forgive us our sins and offer us a relationship with God and eternal life. Mary didn't recognize him because the circumstances of her life prevented it at that moment.

How about you? Who are you looking for? This Easter, may you see Jesus as He really is and accept Him as He is. We're not here to remember a dead guy. We're here to celebrate a living Savior who won the battle over evil, who paid the price for our sins, who rose from the dead, authenticating all that He said and guaranteeing our salvation and eternal life. Who are you looking for? The stone was rolled away, not so Jesus could get out, but so that you and I could get in. Today I want you to know, understand, and feel the reality of the resurrection and its power. When I say, "He has risen," you say, "He is risen indeed!"

He has risen! He is risen indeed! He has risen! He is risen indeed! He has risen! He is risen indeed!

Let us pray together.

Gracious God, Jesus has indeed risen. We have that guarantee and we pray that that reality would seep into our hearts and into our minds. May it be real for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.