

An Easter Start

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John 20:1-10

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

In his book *Sources of Strength*, former President Jimmy Carter recalls a moment from his first day in office. “I had just been inaugurated,” he wrote, “walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, reviewed the parade with my family, and then begun to walk with my family, for the first time, toward the White House. Eager news reporters with cameras surrounded us, and my press secretary said, ‘Don’t anyone stop to answer questions.’ In typical fashion,” Carter went on, “Mama ignored him and stopped to talk to the press. The first question was ‘Miss Lillian, aren’t you proud of your son?’ and Mama replied, ‘Which one?’” (*Leadership*, Summer 98, p. 77)

I love her response. Miss Lillian clearly knew who the reporter had in mind, but was not going on the record as having a bias. One son ran a gas station, and the other was now Commander-in-Chief, yet she was proud of both, or at least unwilling to name her favorite.

The Biblical ancestor Jacob could have benefited from her approach. Our first lesson tells how he openly favored his next-to-youngest son, Joseph, with a robe having long sleeves. Popular culture speaks of it as a coat of many colors. His ten older brothers were so jealous of their father’s clear bias and Joseph’s annoying habit of telling his siblings about dreams where they bow down to him that the older boys decided to sell him into slavery. It turns out all right years later, but Jacob could have saved himself and others a lot of heartache.

It can be tough for teachers, coaches, or grandparents not to have favorites. Sixty years ago, Tom and Dick Smothers had a comedy routine in which the elder Tom, to end an argument, would say to his brother, “Mom always liked you best!” In life, such rivalry is rarely a source of humor, and I think it shaped the description of events described in our New Testament lesson.

In it, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning and finds the stone that had covered its entrance rolled to the side. “She ran and

went to Simon Peter,” we read, “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.’” The men rush toward the site. They ran together, but the unnamed disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bends down to look in and sees the linen once around the body lying in a heap. That evidence alone makes clear that the body has not been stolen, as grave robbers would not have bothered to unwrap the remains before fleeing. Peter arrives and goes inside, noticing the linen and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. It was rolled up and placed by itself. Our text continues, “Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in.” The two men return to their homes.

Each of the gospels has its own version of that first Easter, yet all agree that Mary Magdalene was either the only woman or one of several who first discovered the empty tomb. If you read ahead in John’s version, you will hear of how she stays behind at the tomb after the men have left and soon becomes the first person to see and talk with the risen Christ, too. Yet we stop at this point with its depiction of a rivalry between two disciples.

To see that tension, it’s important to know of some other moments in this gospel when that unnamed disciple plays a prominent role. Prior to this scene, he is the one seated next to Jesus at the Last Supper who asks which of the Twelve will be the betrayer. He is the one with connections to the high priest who secures entrance for Peter into the courtyard as Jesus’ trial unfolds. He is the one who stands at the foot of the cross and to whom Jesus entrusts the care of his mother. After the resurrection, in the last appearance of the risen Christ in John’s gospel, he is the one who first identifies that it is Jesus on the shoreline calling to them. Given those moments and the fact that this designation “the one whom Jesus loved” is not found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, many scholars believe the disciple in question is none other than the author of this gospel. Was he Jesus’ favorite or simply the one who got to write his own narrative, including informing us twice that he arrived ahead of Peter at the tomb? We don’t

know. In either case, that unnamed disciple in his telling of that day reveals a truth about you and me on this Easter.

It comes after Peter enters the tomb. “Then the other disciple,” John continues, “also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” It’s a confusing sentence describing belief and a lack of understanding. Some have concluded that all the man believed was that the tomb was empty. Others will assert that the beloved disciple, and not Mary Magdalene, was the first one to piece together the truth of the resurrection. One New Testament professor argues for something in between.

“It is important to remember,” Gail O’Day writes, “that [this passage is] an empty-tomb story, not a story of a resurrection appearance. What the beloved disciple believes then, is the evidence of the empty tomb: not merely that the tomb is empty, but that it’s emptiness bears witness that Jesus has conquered death...[he] did not know what form Jesus’ conquest of death had taken; he did not know how Jesus’ conquest of death would be manifested among the living; he did not even know how to speak about what he saw in the tomb. All he knew was what the burial cloths told him; that Jesus had conquered death.” (O’Day, Gail “The Gospel of John,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 841,843-4)

In other words, that competitive disciple who wanted the world to know he was Jesus’ favorite was the first one of the Apostles—at least in this gospel—to understand Jesus had defeated death. It did not completely transform him. After all, his account was written decades later, yet he still used boastful language about himself in the narrative, always presenting himself in the best light or as a kind of first among equals. It did not even allow him to know Jesus was alive, but his account reveals an Easter start, depicting something of where we are, too.

Not one of us knows all that happened in those wondrous events. You can draw on all the theological training represented in this chancel and found among the retired clergy in these pews, and I can guarantee that some questions will still not be resolved. My distinguished peers and I will be happy to offer an opinion. We clergy are always good for that! Yet no one here knows whether Mary Magdalene was the only woman present or how that stone was rolled away. No one knows exactly when Jesus was raised; only that it happened sometime between Friday night and early Sunday. There is much we don't know about those events, and that is fine.

For like that disciple who took a second look inside the tomb, we don't have to have it all figured out. We don't have to have all our questions answered or doubts resolved. Rather like him, we can believe that something transformative occurred, even without fully understanding it.

The book *Proof of Heaven* tells the true story of Eben Alexander, a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon who, 18 years ago, experienced a life-threatening bout with bacterial meningitis. He was 54 years old and a self-described religious skeptic when he fell into a coma that ended up lasting for a week. The book recounts his near-death experience, including some bizarre descriptions of heaven, along with the impact of that journey on himself and his loved ones.

In one chapter, he tells of the day when, just hours before the doctors were to remove him from life support, he returned. "My eyes opened," he writes, and my sister, Sylvia, shrieked...She ran out of the room to where Holley [his wife] was...talking [on a cell phone to their son] 'Holley... Holley!' Sylvia shouted. 'He's awake. Awake! Tell Eben his dad is coming back.'...Holley walked, then ran into the ICU, with Dr. Wade right behind her...I was thrashing on the bed... something was clearly bothering me. Dr. Wade immediately understood what it was: the breathing tube that was still in my throat. The tube I no longer needed, because my brain, along with the rest of my body, had just kicked back to

life. He reached over, cut the securing tape, and carefully extracted it. I choked a little, gasped down my first fully unaided lungful of air in seven days, and spoke the first words I'd spoken in a week as well: 'Thank you.'" [His other sister] Phyllis, unaware of what was happening, then appeared. "She was pushing Mom in a wheelchair. They walked into the room, and Phyllis almost fell over backward in disbelief. I was sitting up in bed, meeting their gaze with my own.

"As my loving family and caregivers gathered around my bed, still dumbstruck by the inexplicable transition, I had a peaceful, joyous smile. 'All is well,' I said, radiating that blissful message as much as speaking the words. I looked at each of them...acknowledging the divine miracle of our very existence. 'Don't worry...all is well,' I repeated, to assuage any doubt. Phyllis told me later that it was as if I were imparting a crucial message from the beyond; that the world is as it should be, that we have nothing to fear. She said she often recalls that moment when she is vexed by some earthly concern—to find comfort in knowing that we are never alone.

"As I took stock of the entourage...I asked those who were assembled, 'What are you doing here?'" To which Phyllis replied, 'What are *you* doing here?'" (Alexander, Eben. *Proof of Heaven*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012, pp. 112-114).

Perhaps that is the enduring question for us on this Easter, too, revealing that we do not need to fully grasp all that happens to celebrate unexpected gifts along the way. Nor do we need to understand completely all that occurred in first-century Jerusalem to believe. For whether or not one gospel writer was Jesus' favorite, we can join our voices with his in giving thanks for what we do know: the demonstration of God's unbreakable love as revealed in an empty tomb.