

## “Don’t Forget to Talk to the Gardener”

John 20: 1 – 18

Makemie Presbyterian church

Easter! April 12, 2009

### **John 20: 1 - 18**

20Early 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. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand

the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

<sup>13</sup>They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This ends the reading.

This week I ran into a man & wife, while I was at the dentist's who were traveling along the east coast. They had started in Maine & were headed to Key West. While they were here they had run into toothache trouble. I could hear the wife saying to Dr. Plack, "We don't have a lot of time. Just take out the tooth. No time for nitrous oxide or novacaine or anything like that. Just yank it out & we will be on our way."

Dr. Plack said, "You must be a brave woman. Show me the tooth."

She gestured to her husband, "Honey, open your mouth & show him the tooth."

When I was a girl, I spent a lot of time out in the Alabama back woods, which were full of treasures for me. At night I lined them up on my bed: fat flakes of mica, Sweet gum burrs bigger than shooter marbles, blue jay feathers, bird bones and -- if I was lucky -- a cicada shell, one of those dry brown bug bodies you can find on tree trunks when the 17-year locusts come out of the ground. I liked them for at least two reasons.

First, because I had 18 boy cousins who would torment me, saying horrible things. This boys would taunt me. Here is what they would say,

“You’re a girl. A girl. A little old girl.” It made me furious. I wanted to fit in with them. Be one of them. And when I would complain to my mother, she would say, “You’re not making any sense. You are a girl.” She didn’t understand, at all. But gathering the cicada’s well, they were so monstrous looking, with their huge empty eye sockets & their six sharp little claws, it helped me to feel more boy-like. And by hanging them on my sweater or -- better yet -- in my hair, I could usually get the prettier, more popular girls at school to run screaming away from me, which somehow evened the score.

I also liked the cicadas because they were evidence that a miracle had occurred. They looked dead, but they weren’t. They were just shells. Every one of them had a neat slit down its back, where the living creature inside of it had escaped, pulling new legs, new eyes, new wings out of that dry brown body & taking flight. At night I could hear them singing their high song in the trees. And if we had asked them, I’ll bet nary a one of them could have told us where they left their old clothes.

That is all the disciples saw when they got to the tomb on that first morning -- two piles of old clothes. Mary didn’t even see that much. She was too distraught. The moment she saw the door to the tomb standing wide open, she ran to tell Simon Peter & the other disciples that Jesus’

body had been stolen. They beat her back to the tomb & found that she was right, at least about his body being gone.

Only why would grave robbers have bothered to undress him first? Without even going inside, the beloved disciple could see the linen wrappings all lying in a heap. When Peter went inside, he saw more. The cloth that had been on Jesus' head was rolled up in a place by itself. Odd, that someone should go to all the trouble of rolling it up.

None of it was making any sense to them, John says, because no one who was there that morning understood the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead. Still, when the beloved disciple followed Peter inside the tomb & saw the clothes lying there, he believed. Believed what? John does not say. He simply believed & without another word to each other he & Peter returned to their homes.

The rest of the story belongs to Mary. She is the one who saw the angels. She is the one who saw the risen Lord, who had gotten himself some new clothes, incidentally. Someone recently pointed out to me that there is a naked gardener in this story somewhere. Either that or Jesus found the extra set of work clothes down by the fertilizer & the rakes.

Peter & the beloved disciple saw none of this. They saw nothing but a vacant tomb with two piles of clothes in it. They saw nothing but emptiness & absence, in other words, & on that basis at least one of them believed, although neither of them understood.

Any way we look at it, that is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted over 2000 years now, & yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on that tomb, on that morning, on what did or did not happen there & how do we explain it to anyone who doesn't happen to believe it too. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either.

The resurrection is the one & only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them saw nothing at all because they were still in bed that morning, but as it turned out that didn't matter because the empty tomb was not the point.

The tomb was just the cicada shell with the neat slit down its back. The living being that had once been inside of it was gone. The singing was going on somewhere else, which may be why Peter & the other disciple did not stay very long. Clearly, Jesus was not there. He could have stayed put, I guess, sitting there all pink & healthy between the two piles of clothes so that everyone could come in & see him, but that isn't what he did.

He had outgrown his tomb, which was too small a focus for the resurrection. The risen one had people to see & things to do. The living one's business was among the living, to whom he appeared not once but four more times in the Gospel of John. Every time he came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him.

Those appearances cinch the resurrection for me, not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus & God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the gardener said, "Mary!" & she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened & goes on happening -- not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord.

In the end, that is the only evidence we have to offer those who ask us how we can possibly believe. Because we live, that is why. Because we have found, to our surprise, that we are not alone. Because we never know where he will turn up next. Here is one thing that helps: never get so focused on the empty tomb that you forget to speak to the gardener.

According to John, Mary was not convinced that Jesus had risen. She comes to believe only when the risen Christ calls her name. When he calls her name, “Mary” she turns toward him.

Isn't this the reason most of us believe? Because we have heard Christ call our name? Maybe it was during worship service or while we were reading the Bible, or tucking the kids into bed, or sitting on the back porch with a cup of coffee, quiet in the early morning. Or reading a good book, looking at a piece of art, hiking through the woods, collecting treasures. Or maybe it was a time of deep trouble or doubt. Or a morning so spectacular our mind goes to the Creator.

Mary heard Christ call her name & she believed. Our personal response is what we go on. No outward evidence really convinces anyone. We hold onto the truth that Christ reaches out to us. Christ calls out name

and gives us the grace to hear him. Listen for the gardener. Don't forget to speak to the gardener. Amen.