

Series: Coexist!

Sermon: What the world can learn from Christianity

John 20:1-18 (NIV)

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, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

3 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. 6 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. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 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.” 14 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. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 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.

Sermon: It might be hard to believe, but I like jokes. And clever practical jokes. Even though I’m a pastor and I’m supposed to take everything seriously, I do like to laugh. Here are some of my favorite practical jokes. Two of the them have to do with football. During the SMU-TCU game in 1999, both bands were allowed to do their half-time show, even though the game was at TCU. During their routine, SMU’s band put themselves into a formation that spelled out their schools name. At that point, a soloist played a short few measures. While that was going on, all of the Southern Methodist band members discreetly reached into their pockets pulled out some rye grass seed, and sprinkled it in the spot where they were standing, and then went on with the routine. The next year, when the grass came up at the TCU football field, you could easily see a different colored grass on the field, spelling out their rival, SMU. Of course, it was the Methodist’s fault. I’m not sure if this one is true. If it isn’t, it should be. A student from MIT went to the Harvard football field every day in the summer, blew a whistle and threw out bird seed. Naturally, over a couple of months, the birds got the idea. The first day of

football practice for Harvard had to be cancelled, because the coach was on the field with the team, he blew his whistle, and the team was inundated and attacked by hungry pigeons. I remember a prank from high school, someone released pigs into the hallways. And they were numbered with spraypaint on their sides. 1, 2 and 4. They spent forever looking for that non-existent 3. Worst prank I had on me was given by my brother. He took a metal paper clip, went to my truck, and opened up the fuse box. He put the paperclip between my brake lights and the horn. So when I applied the brakes, the juice went not only to my brake lights but also to my horn. It took me two stop signs to figure out that it was I who was honking. To any good prank, there is a level of ingenuity and an element of surprise. I remember a surprise birthday party a while back. Rarely is there any “surprise” in a surprise birthday party. The tale-tell signs are everywhere — the whispered phone calls and the secretive meetings. Besides, since you know that your birthday is coming up, you’re not at all surprised if your friends jump out from behind the sofa and yell: “Surprise!” A real surprise would be a long lost friend unexpectedly showing up on your doorstep. Or, you go out to dig a well in the backyard and stumble upon a complete T-Rex skeleton. That’s the definition of a surprise. It’s something that happens, which you wouldn’t ever expect to happen.

If you look at the more prominent characters in scripture, we find the element of surprise in their narratives. Moses, what did you do today? I talked to a burning bush. Surprise! Mary, how was your day? Well, I’m pregnant. I didn’t know you could do that by yourself. Surprise! Noah, whatcha doing? Building a big big boat. Why? It’s a surprise. How long can you tread water? And if I had to give a one word definition to holy week, from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday to Good Friday to Easter, it would be, Surprise. Although the four gospel accounts of Easter morning differ to some degree in how they pass on the details of that event, they all agree on one thing. They agree that everyone involved was truly surprised at every twist and turn.

There was surprise at Palm Sunday from the Pharisees and Sadducees at seeing Jesus coming into Jerusalem as a king. There was surprise at the Last Supper, when Jesus took the passover feast and changed the elements ever so slightly. This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which is shed for you. There was surprise that night when Jesus was arrested. The Disciples almost slept through it. Remember, they were just dozing when the soldiers showed up. Surprise. And at his Crucifixion the next day, the Disciples were surely surprised at these turn of events. Matter of fact, that’s where we get the word surprise from. From the Old French, Sur is over, Prende is to grasp. Sur prende, surprise, over grasp. To get the upper hand. The dramatic change of events. At the end of Good Friday, which wasn’t all that good, the forces of evil had the upper hand. Jesus, dead. The movement, over. Peace on earth, good will toward all, not gonna happen.

Although John doesn’t explicitly say this, we could assume from his narrative that Mary Magdalene had watched the soldiers take Jesus down from the cross. If we make that assumption, we might also imagine her helping Joseph and Nicodemus prepare the body and then place it in the tomb. If we had been there with her, and had shared in her experience of the cross, like her, we would have been devastated. Good Friday had dashed all of her hopes and dreams, and so when she went to the tomb, early on that first day of the week, thinking that the story was over. She went to grieve, not to find an empty tomb. I can see her walking toward the tomb in the coolness of the morning, tears falling down her face, wondering what would happen to her now that the Master was gone.

While she was in that frame of mind, she would have looked up, her eyes cloudy with tears, and discovered that the stone, which sealed the tomb, had been rolled out of the way. I think she would have been frantic when she looked in and found the tomb empty. I don’t hear in this text Mary shouting out: “Oh joy, he’s been resurrected, just as he said.” No, as John suggests, her first inclination was that someone had come and stolen the body; there was no other possible explanation.

When she returned to where the disciples were hiding, her story led Peter and the beloved disciple, to check out the story for themselves. Although the beloved disciple got there first, he deferred to Peter, who entered first.

Like Mary, Peter found the tomb to be empty. Although John says that beloved disciple looked in and believed, I don't see anyone jumping and down celebrating the resurrection. So, I'm not exactly sure what the beloved disciple believed, because apparently they still didn't "understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

Everyone went back into hiding, everyone except Mary, who stayed behind. Maybe she was hoping she could find the body or at least get an answer to where the body might be. It's at this point in John's version of the Easter story, that Mary looks into the tomb and finds two white-robed angels sitting where the body had once lain. They asked her what would appear to be a most insensitive question: "Why are you weeping?" And she answers: "They have taken away my Lord." While the beloved disciple may have believed, Mary remained unconvinced. The tomb's emptiness didn't prod her toward faith in the resurrection. She knew that bodies didn't just disappear, there had to be a logical explanation, but these two messengers from God didn't offer her any help. They just reinforced her confusion and her grief.

As the story continues, Mary realizes that someone is standing behind her. She glances back, but doesn't recognize who it is, but she figures it must be the gardener. When the supposed gardener asks: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" In her anger and in her grief, she yells back at him: "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." While the angels didn't help, when the "gardener" called out her name, he broke her world view, and ours, wide open. She knew exactly who it was, when Jesus called out her name. This was her surprise. She went looking for a body, but she found her Lord. Indeed, she shouted out "Rabboni!" And then she probably said something like: "Oh my, you're not dead! You're alive." She must have been as giddy as Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning. She was so excited that Jesus had to restrain her. I can see her grabbing hold of him and not wanting to let go. He'd gone away once, but she wasn't going to let him go away again. But Jesus said to her "don't touch, you have to let me go."

I'm sure Mary let go very reluctantly, but Jesus wasn't finished with her quite yet. She would be his witness, his apostle. He commissioned her to take the good news of the resurrection to the rest of the disciples. This is another Easter surprise, because in choosing Mary to be his first witness, Jesus elevated her, and with her, all women, to a place of equality with men in the kingdom of God. He could have revealed himself to Peter, or to the beloved disciple, but he waited for Mary, and that just didn't happen back then. But on that day it did, and it changed her life and ours forever!

So what's the message to us today? On this glorious Easter morning, I want to tell you that God is a God of surprises! Let God surprise you! Do something that you can only accomplish by the Grace of God. Have an adventure. God still has surprises waiting for us. Mary proclaims to us this message: Surprise! He is alive! And if Jesus is alive, then we're alive! Death no longer reigns. Indeed, death has lost its sting. There is no need to fear. Why? Because Jesus has conquered death, and made it his servant. Therefore, with Mary, we can proclaim this surprising message: "Alleluia, Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" Easter is a day of surprises.