

Theme: Proclaim the Good News

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we are gathered here to celebrate the resurrection of your son; the long three days are ended and Jesus' tomb is empty; may we like Mary Magdalene share this good news with others, through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest and noted author of books about preaching. Barbara shares a story of when she was a young girl, in her own words. "When I was a girl, I spent a lot of time in the woods, which were full of treasures for me. At night I lined them up on my bed: fat flakes of mica, buckeyes 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 they were horrible looking, with their huge empty eye sockets and their six sharp little claws. 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 them 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 and taking flight. At night I could hear them singing their high song in the trees. If you had asked them, I'll bet none of them could have told you 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."¹

Barbara Brown Taylor gives us an insight into the empty tomb from nature. I guess technically the tomb was not empty. Jesus left his burial clothes behind. Those clothes no longer defined Jesus. Jesus was no longer dead. He

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Escape from the Tomb," an article in *The Christian Century*, April 1, 1998, page 339.

is risen. He wears resurrection clothes.

Before sunrise on that Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb. In spite of the darkness, Mary found her way to the tomb and when she got there, she saw that the stone covering the tomb was rolled away.

The first thought that comes to Mary's mind is, "grave robbers." Grave robbers were common in those days. Mary assumes that the body was stolen. She did not go into the tomb. Mary immediately ran off to tell Peter about this calamitous event.

Another, an unnamed disciple, is with Peter at the time. They both run off toward the tomb. The unnamed disciple reaches the tomb first. He looks in and sees Jesus' burial clothes in a pile. It must have looked like a teenager's room. He doesn't go in.

Impulsively, Peter doesn't stop at the entrance, he goes in. Peter saw the burial clothes. But he also saw the cloth that covered Jesus' face, rolled up and in a place by itself. Grave robbers would not have left the clothes behind. Lazarus came out of the tomb with all the wrappings still on his body. These have been left behind. Something different has happened here.

The unnamed disciple went in, saw the scene, and then believed that Jesus rose from the dead. Neither he nor Peter had put this news into the context of the Old Testament though. They do not yet grasp the significance of the empty tomb. The two of them went back where they came from, leaving Mary weeping outside the tomb. They didn't stop to ask why she was crying. They just left.

There are germs of what happened to the unnamed disciple. Faith precedes understanding. It is a gift. The historical teaching about the mysteries of the faith follows baptism. Faith comes first as a gift. Sorting it out comes later. It is like love for a child, which proceeds knowing who the child will be. What this disciple sees leads this disciple to understand the resurrection.

Mary stays behind. She has grieving to do, and she knows it. She has tears to shed, and she knows it. And it is through those tears that she sees the risen Jesus. That is what moves me so deeply and touches my own experience. So often it is through our tears that we experience the risen Christ. Frederick

Buechner says, "It is not the absence of Jesus from the empty tomb that moves us. It is his presence in our empty hearts."

Sometime, perhaps minutes, perhaps seconds, later, Mary Magdalene looks in the tomb and sees two angels. She is still crying. She is overcome with grief and sadness. I don't know if Mary saw an angel before or how she would recognize one if she saw one. They were dressed in white, sitting where Jesus' body was laid. The angels were not interested in talking to Peter and the other disciple. They were there for the mourning Mary. Perhaps they were there when Peter and the other disciple went into the tomb, but their faith was not strong enough to recognize them.

The angels asked Mary why she was crying. They asked the question that Peter and the other disciple didn't ask of her. They don't announce the resurrection. They are focused on Mary's grief. Mary told them someone stole Jesus' body and it is missing.

Then Mary turns around and there is another man standing there. It's Jesus, but Mary didn't recognize him. After all, Jesus is dead, right? Mary in her grief cannot think right. She can't recognize Jesus. She is in a place where she can recognize angels, but not Jesus. After all, Jesus is dead. Whoever is standing near her cannot be Jesus.

Jesus also asks Mary why she is crying. Mary asks him, if he stole Jesus' body to please tell her where it is. Mary was unintentionally very perceptive. Jesus *did* steal Jesus' body. Jesus is the grave robber. And he's right in front of her!

Jesus calls her name and she recognizes his voice. Jesus is the good shepherd and calls us by name. She says, "Rabbouni," which means Rabbi or teacher in Aramaic. Since Jesus has yet to ascend into heaven, he doesn't want to be touched.

Mary is not to cling to Jesus, she is to share Jesus. Mary is not to keep Jesus for herself. She is to share with others the good news of the risen Christ. Jesus instructs Mary to tell his disciples that he is going to God the Father. Mary does as she is told and tells Jesus' friends what he said and what she had seen.

Mary Magdalene provides an example for us. The Good News is not to be kept to ourselves. We are to share it. The greatest message is that of the resurrection. There is an old joke that goes like this: the clergyperson knocks on the door and hears a woman inside call out, "Is that you angel?" The clergyperson replies, "No, but I am from the same department." We are in the message department. Our mission is to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen.

Mary Magdalene is called the Apostle to the apostles. Mary is the one who was entrusted by Jesus to tell the good news of his resurrection. Contrary to popular, non-biblical opinion, Mary was not a prostitute. Mary was faithful when the male disciples abandoned Jesus. She was at the foot of the cross. She went to the tomb after the sabbath was over.

Out of place for her culture, Mary Magdalene, a woman, was chosen by Jesus to be one of the leaders of his movement. Mary gives the first sermon. And she never went to seminary and was never approved by the apostles. The sermon is simple, "I have seen the Lord." It is Mary whom Jesus commissions to proclaim what has happened. We are to follow Mary Magdalene.

In this story, we are not talking about a resuscitation. It is not reincarnation. It is not a return to things the way they were before. Jesus is going to God the Father. God is a unity, which John reminds us over and over again. Easter is the heart of the Christian faith. Death is dead. We are promised a much better life after this one. And that life is in eternal bliss with God. We hear the story again and through that story we hear Jesus call the names of those he loves and we will shout again, "I have seen the Lord!"

Jesus is always full of surprises. Easter was no exception. The life of Jesus seems to always be about coming and seeing what wonderful things are happening. The resurrection forces us to see things differently. Should it be that this is the same expectation of Jesus' followers? How wonderful it would be if people said, "These followers of Jesus are not like other people; come and see how they love the world."

Text: **John 20:1–18** (NRSV)

20 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. ² 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.”³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^a into the tomb;¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^b “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ 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.’”¹⁸ 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.²

^a Gk lacks *to look*

^b That is, *Aramaic*

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 20:1–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.