

March 31, 2013 – Easter

“Where Is He?”

John 20:1-18

Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. **2** She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. **4** They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn't go in. **6** Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, **7** while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. **8** Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed— **9** for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. **10** Then they went home.

11 Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. **12** She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. **13** "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

14 She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. **15** "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?"

She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

16 "Mary!" Jesus said.

She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

17 "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

18 Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

Every time a new Pope is elected, there are many rituals in accordance with tradition, but, there is one tradition that very few people know about.

Shortly after a new Pope is enthroned, the Chief Rabbi of Rome seeks an audience. He is shown into the Pope's presence, whereupon he presents the Pope with a silver tray bearing a velvet cushion. On top of the cushion is an ancient, shriveled envelope. The Pope symbolically stretches out his arm in a gesture of rejection. The Chief Rabbi then retires, taking the envelope with him and does not return until the next Pope is

elected.

A new Pope's reign was shortly followed by a new Chief Rabbi. He was intrigued by this ritual and that its origins were unknown to him. He instructed the best scholars of the Vatican to research it, but they came up with nothing.

When the time came and the Chief Rabbi was shown into his presence, they faithfully enacted the ritual rejection but, as the Chief Rabbi turned to leave, the Pope called him back.

"My brother," the Pope whispered, "I must confess that we Catholics are ignorant of the meaning of this ritual enacted for centuries between us and you, the representative of the Jewish people. I have to ask you, what is it all about?"

The Chief Rabbi shrugged and replied: "We have no more idea than you do. The origin of the ceremony is lost in the traditions of ancient history."

The Pope said: "Let us retire to my private chambers and enjoy a glass of kosher wine together; then with your agreement, we shall open the envelope and discover the secret at last." The Chief Rabbi agreed.

Fortified in their resolve by the wine, they gingerly pried open the curling parchment envelope and with trembling fingers, the Chief Rabbi reached inside and extracted a folded sheet of similarly ancient paper.

As the Pope peered over his shoulder, he slowly opened it. They both gasped with shock -

It was a bill for the Last Supper - from "Moishe the Caterer."

Mystery solved!

Our Scripture reading today also has the elements of a good mystery story: There's a missing body, investigators poring over the evidence, an eerie encounter, and a surprise resolution.

Jesus was put to death Friday by crucifixion. The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb, never used before. Because it was the day of preparation for the Jewish Passover and since the tomb was close by Jesus' body was laid to rest there.

Early on Sunday morning, so early that it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. When she got there she found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She immediately assumed that the body was taken by grave robbers.

That was a reasonable assumption; for the robbing of tombs was a common problem at that time. It was such a common occurrence that Emperor Claudius (reigned A.D. 41-54) passed a law ordering capital punishment for such desecration and destruction. Mary ran and found Peter and John and told them, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" It seems that Mary had no expectation of Jesus' resurrection.

Peter and John both went running to the tomb. When they got there they investigated the evidence- clues to the cause of the missing body. They saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had covered Jesus' head separate and neatly folded by itself. This meant that the body could not have been stolen. Grave robbers would not take the time to unwrap the body let alone take the time to neatly fold some of the grave clothes and risk being discovered and caught. Grave robbers would have carried the corpse to a safe place and then unwrap the body to find any valuables that may have been buried with the deceased. Not only that but the wrappings themselves and any spices used in burial would also have value and would not be left behind by robbers.

John saw this evidence and believed, even though it would be later on that he and the other disciples would understand from the Old Testament writings that the Messiah, Jesus must rise from the dead. I'm not sure about Peter, but John saw and believed without yet fully understanding. John believed without seeing the risen Jesus. Just as many after him including many here today who came to believe without seeing the risen Christ. Jesus promised that even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.

John and Peter went home, I'm sure still pondering the evidence; but Mary stayed alone outside the tomb, crying. As she wept, she stooped and looked in the cave tomb. When she did she saw two messengers or angels, dressed in white, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. These angels were messengers sent by God indicating that it was not grave robbers who were responsible for the missing body of Jesus, but rather God was involved.

The angels said to her, "Dear woman, why are you crying?" And Mary repeats what she said earlier to Peter and John, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put Him." The only difference is that to Peter and John she said, "we don't know where they have put him!" and here she says, "I don't know." Which would indicate that there were others with her in the early morning when she went to the tomb; and we know from other gospel accounts that this is so, but now she is at the tomb alone with these angels/ messengers of God.

And then... Jesus Himself is standing there, but she didn't recognize Him. He asks her the same question, "Dear woman, why are you crying?" but adds, "Who are you looking for?" Isn't that great! The One she sought asks her Whom she is seeking.

She says to Him, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him." She asks the one Whose body she is seeking to answer the mystery of the empty tomb. She is seeking her Savior, she is seeking her life, she is seeking her hope, and here He is right in front of her and she doesn't recognize Him. She doesn't recognize the Resurrected One, yet this prepares the way for Jesus to make an unexpected and amazing revelation of His identity.

He calls Mary by name and Mary turned to Him, recognized Him and cried out, "My Master!"

John 10:3

... the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

Jesus says to Mary, "Don't cling to me," – don't mess with the evidence. But go find my brothers – for the first time He refers to His followers as brothers. Christ's resurrection created a new level of relationship, those who believe in Him, He calls His sisters and brothers. Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" – Mystery solved!

We are all like Mary, seeking answers, needing hope, wanting fulfillment, security, love, value, searching for a savior. He is here, do you recognize Him? He is calling you by name, "Mary," "John," "Amy," "Joe."

Can you imagine the love that flooded Mary's heart when she heard her Savior saying her name!

Your heart may be filled with grief and despair, but Jesus knows your name. Suffering does not mean that you have been forgotten! Jesus knows every tear and every trial you face. In sorrow, He seeks you out by his comforting Holy Spirit, to minister to you.

Like Mary your sorrows and fears can blur your vision. You don't recognize that Jesus is standing there with you.

Like Mary you cannot meet Christ until you discover that the tomb is empty, and Jesus is indeed alive.

John says at the end of this chapter:

John 20:31 NIV

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Like Mary and the disciples I want the mystery of the Resurrection solved for you, but like them you may pass through different stages of belief.

(1) You may think the story is made up

- (2) Next, you may check out the facts, yet still be puzzled
- (3) Only when you encounter Jesus personally will you be able to accept the fact of the Resurrection
- (4) Then, as you commit yourself to the risen Lord and devote your life to serving Him, you begin to understand fully the reality of His presence with you.

Mystery solved.