

While It Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18 (PART 2)

Baxter T. Exum (#1730)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
April 7, 2024



Good morning and welcome! We are glad you are here, and if you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us as well. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

We are here this morning to honor God, to thank him for saving us and to share the good news of God's love with others. We were lost, but Jesus found us. He gave his life for us on the cross, he was buried, but he was raised up alive on the third day, just as he promised. We obey this good news by believing the message, by turning away from sin, by publicly stating our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by being buried with him in baptism. We do have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from Nazar Simikoz, who preaches in Brovary, Ukraine. As translated by Facebook, Nazar says, "Let us congratulate Lubov on her new birth in Christ Jesus!!!! A great joy in the community of Brovary. After Sunday worship, Lubov became our sister, made the most important decision in her life, to become a Christian and make a full immersion in water. We are very happy that she is now a part of our big family! Let us pray for her spiritual growth, that her faith will only grow stronger! Thankful to the Lord for the opportunities to spread and serve the Gospel in this wonderful community of Brovary! Glory to Christ!" Nazar's Facebook page says that he has studied at the Bear Valley Bible Institute extension school in Ukraine. Back in 2014, a group of armed men describing themselves as soldiers of the Russian Federation came into the assembly of the church over there and gave the church two hours to leave before they destroyed the building. So, it is good to see that in spite of that, good things are happening over there right now.

This next one comes to us from David Paul, who recently baptized a former denominational minister in Hyderabad, India. David is part of a school to train preachers over there, and that's about all we know. It looks like their baptistery might be on the roof of the building, which is unusual for us, but great to see it!

And this last one comes to us from Melvin Otey, a good man we met in Washington, DC, a number of years ago, when the church met in the lower level of his law office. He is a Christian attorney: Amazing! Brother Otey has had an interesting career, and he is now an associate professor of law down at Faulkner University in Alabama. I love this man, but he posted earlier this week, letting us know that his youngest son, Christian, has now obeyed the gospel after attending a Lads to Leaders convention over in Atlanta. Melvin says that "...last

night, after we got home from Atlanta and were winding down for the night, he called [my wife] and I together and told us he wanted to be baptized. He talked. We listened. He said, 'I know what I need to do. I'm ready.' I said, 'You're right.' We headed for the church building. Several folks from the Perry Hill Road family beat us to the building and shared in the occasion. Thank you!" Good news from Alabama this week! There are many others we could have shared this morning, but we share these by way of encouragement: If you would like to study God's plan for your life, if you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch using the contact information on the wall up here (or on your screen at home). If you are joining us on the phone, you can send a text or give me a call at 608-224-0274.

Last week, we started looking at the resurrection of Jesus in John 20, and we introduced that lesson by noting that Abraham Lincoln is dead and buried. Yes, his body was moved roughly 17 times and his casket was opened at least five times over a 36 year period (and this confirmed that he was in fact dead and in the tomb). His body is now in a lead-lined casket, locked in a steel cage, and buried under two tons of concrete ten feet deep. On the other hand, the tomb of Jesus is empty.

And last week we started looking at John's account of the resurrection in John 20, so I would encourage you to be joining me once again in John 20 (p. 1695). But by the time John writes his account roughly 50 years after it happens, John has boiled it down to the basics – the eyewitness accounts of three people who came to the tomb that morning, starting with Mary Magdalene, who shows up at the tomb ***"while it was still dark."*** We noted that Jesus had saved this woman from a life of demon possession, and we noted that Mary served Jesus faithfully from that day forward, even contributing to his support from her own private means, along with a number of other women (according to the first few verses of Luke 8). And last week, we noted that when Mary shows up to the tomb, she finds it empty, so she runs back to tell Peter and John, they run to the tomb to see it for themselves, they see the grave clothes lying there with the face cloth rolled or folded up on its own, over to the side. So, this is not a grave robbery as they might have first imagined. It just barely starts clicking with John, but we focused in last week on the fact that these first three disciples are in a state of confusion. They really have no idea what's going on. Something has happened, but they really don't get it.

This morning, then, I want us to go back and read the passage again, and then we will conclude our study this morning by focusing in on two aspects of Mary's involvement in this event. So, let's look together this morning at John 20:1-18,

¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." ³ So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. ⁶ And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

¹¹ But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, "Woman, why are you

weeping?” She said to them, “Because 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, and did not know that it was Jesus.* ¹⁵ *Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).* ¹⁷ *Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”* ¹⁸ *Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and that He had said these things to her.*

- II. So, as we left it last week (at the end of verses 1-10), Peter and John return home, but Mary apparently stays behind. Still confused. This brings us to the next paragraph, where we see that Mary is **BLINDED BY GRIEF.**

In fact, four times in verses 11-15, Mary is described as ***“weeping.”*** And we start this paragraph with Mary stooping to look back inside the tomb, yet again. Have you ever looked for something you’ve lost and looked in the same place twice? I do that. On the rare occasion I can’t find my phone, I might go look in the car, and then I’ll come in and look around my chair, and then I’ll go back to the car, and so on. And that’s almost what Mary does here. She looks back in the tomb again, and this time, when Mary stoops and looks into the tomb, she sees two angels sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet of where Jesus had been lying. So let’s realize right here that the Romans are no longer in control of this tomb. Let’s also note that the Jewish ruling council is no longer in control of this tomb. Joseph of Arimathea is no longer in control of his own tomb. No, heaven is in control of this tomb, and God proves this by sending his messengers into the tomb. An angel is a messenger; that’s what the word ***“angel”*** means. God, then, sends his messengers into this tomb, and these two angels say to Mary, ***“Woman, why are you weeping?”*** And she answers through her tears, ***“Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”*** I don’t know how significant this is, but I hope we’ve noticed the shift in pronouns here. Up in verse 2 she says, ***“They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.”*** Now, though, Mary refers to Jesus as ***“my Lord.”*** This is personal! And let’s also understand that Mary still has no idea what’s going on here. Based on what she’s seen, the grave has been disturbed, and Jesus is gone. She assumes that somebody has taken him away.

At this point, Mary turns around, and she sees Jesus standing there in the garden, but she doesn’t recognize Jesus as being Jesus. But he is ***“standing.”*** He’s not laid out on a stretcher, he’s not in a wheelchair, he’s not propped up against a rock, he’s not leaning against a wall, he’s not writing in anguish and pain (like the last time Mary saw him), but he is ***“standing”*** right there in the garden. Perhaps we think of that passage in Revelation 5:6 where John (the author of this account) sees ***“...between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.”*** So also, Jesus is not in need of intensive care, but he is standing right there in the garden, and she assumes that he’s the gardener. And that makes sense. If I go to a garden or a cemetery at sunrise, and if I see a guy standing or walking around, I might also assume that the man is the gardener or a caretaker. We might expect someone under these circumstances to be carrying a shovel or maybe a weed-whacker.

Nevertheless, the gardener (Jesus) now speaks to Mary (just as the angels did) and he says, ***“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”*** I don’t think Jesus is rebuking Mary here. If he wanted to rebuke her,

he could've just said, "Stop crying!" But Jesus always has a way of asking questions to get people talking, to get people to open up. Remember: Before healing, Jesus would sometimes ask people, ***"Do you want to get well?"*** Of course! And while it may sound like a stupid question, the Lord's goal in that was always to increase a person's faith. And personally, I think that's what is going on here. Jesus knows why Mary is weeping. Jesus knows who Mary is looking for. But Jesus is asking for Mary's sake. We might think about a little kid crying, and as parents, we might ask, "What's wrong buddy?" or "What's wrong, sweetie?" As parents, we may know what's wrong, but we are opening the conversation. So also with Jesus.

But as we learn from the text, Mary still doesn't know that Jesus is Jesus. And that's a bit strange, isn't it? If Mary loved Jesus so much, she traveled with the Lord for several years, she was with him perhaps even on a daily basis, so why doesn't she recognize Jesus here? We have several possibilities: First of all, it's dark. The text tells us it's dark. At least it was dark. She went to go get Peter and John, they show up and leave, and now Mary is left at the tomb alone. But at best, it is still very early in the morning. And when it's dark, it can be hard to recognize somebody. Perhaps Mary is in the entrance to the tomb, she's looking out, and Jesus is disguised by the silhouette, perhaps the rising sun is behind him, obscuring his appearance. A second possibility is that Jesus' appearance was still somewhat altered from having endured the crucifixion. He'd been brutally beaten to within an inch of his life and then hung on a cross until he died. But wouldn't the resurrection heal those wounds? Not necessarily. A week later, we remember Jesus showing Thomas the holes in his hands and feet and the hole from the spear in his side. Yes, Jesus was alive, but he was clearly wounded, which might have changed his appearance. A third possibility is that Jesus somehow concealed himself miraculously. Another possibility is that Jesus was simply appearing to Mary at a time and place she never would have expected.

Whenever I think of not recognizing somebody, I think of visiting my grandmother (my dad's mom) in nursing home for the very first time. As I remember it, she had a stroke, and when we traveled to Tennessee and went in to see her, we got the room number from the front desk, and when I entered the room, there was this woman in a wheelchair looking out the window, and she did not look like my grandmother. At all. My grandmother always had big poofy hair, and this woman had her pulled back in a little ponytail. I had never seen my grandmother in a ponytail in my entire life. I finally realized that yes, this is my grandmother, but it took a while. She looked different, and she was in a place where I had never seen her before. Or maybe we have been mistaken for somebody else. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever accidentally worn an orange shirt to Home Depot or a red shirt to Target? I've given all kinds of directions and advice in various places. Years ago, I remember walking into a thrift store down in Verona, and there was a woman who went in right before me with a small child in her cart, and when I walked in the door, the child saw me, threw his arms up in the air toward me and excitedly screamed, "Santa!" I have been mistaken for Santa! Or we might think back to the time when Gerald Frump came up here from Shults-Lewis Child and Family Services and then went out with us to Culver's. Everybody thought he was Craig Culver. We had people coming up to us asking him, "Hey, can you please build a Culver's in such and such town over in Minnesota?" He was surprised at first, but eventually Gerald started saying, "Sure! We'll be sure to look into that!" But for whatever reason, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus as being Jesus.

So, when Jesus asks, ***"Woman, why are you weeping?"*** and ***"Whom are you seeking,"*** Mary (in her grief) does not answer those questions, but supposing Jesus to be the gardener, she says to him, ***"Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take him away."*** Here is this woman offering to go take and carry a body all on her own! This woman proposes carrying a dead body all on her own: Just tell me where he is, and I will take him away! Bodies are heavy! Have you guys tried lifting a body lately? But Mary is apparently ready for it. And I don't know if we thought about this, but she's kind of accusing the gardener of taking the body, isn't she? Up in verse 13, she tells the angels that some unknown ***"they"*** have taken the body,

but here she's looking at the gardener, ***"If YOU have taken him away."*** She's not really thinking clearly. She is blinded by grief.

But before we're too hard on Mary, let's realize: We don't see things perfectly all the time either, do we? Sometimes, we also are blinded by grief, blinded by anxiety, blinded by temptation, blinded by pain, blinded by disillusionment, blinded by discouragement, and on and on and on. The doctor comes in with bad news, we see a loved one laid out in a casket for the first time, or maybe we're just overwhelmed with the thought of a child who's turned away from the Lord. Life has a way of blinding us. So also with Mary. Jesus was alive, and Mary truly had no good reason to be crying right at this moment, but Mary couldn't see it. She couldn't see him, even though he was standing right in front of her. Mary is blinded by grief.

III. This brings us to the last paragraph here, as we discover that Mary is given A NEW MISSION.

She must have turned from Jesus back toward the tomb, because in verse 16, Jesus says to her, ***"Mary!"*** And Mary turns back to the Lord and says to him in Hebrew, ***"Rabboni!"*** With the turning from the tomb back to Jesus, I hope we realize that Mary is convinced of the resurrection not by SEEING Jesus, but by HEARING his voice. She recognizes Jesus, not with her EYES, but with her EARS. She is convinced by hearing one word as Jesus calls her by name. We assume that Jesus had called her by name a number of years earlier when he saved her and freed her from those seven evil spirits, and now he calls her by name again. As Jesus had explained earlier (in John 10:27-28), ***"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand."***

And let's note here that Jesus answers none of her questions, but all of her questions, all at once. He doesn't explain how the stone was rolled away, he doesn't explain who took his body, he doesn't tell her where they put it, but by calling her by name, Jesus makes all other questions completely irrelevant and tells her all she needs to know: Jesus is alive!

And Mary responds by crying out, ***"Rabboni!"*** (which, as John explains, means ***"Teacher"***). The point is: Mary knows this is Jesus. And she apparently also responds by ***"clinging"*** to the Lord, because Jesus has to say, ***"Stop clinging to Me."*** It's not that it was wrong to touch him – after all, Jesus specifically invites Thomas to touch him a week later – but this seems to be a matter of timing, a matter of urgency. They can't stand there hugging all day, because there's work to do and a very limited amount of time to get it done. Jesus still needs to ascend to the Father.

And this is where Jesus gives Mary a new mission. When she woke up that morning, her mission was to anoint Jesus' body with spices. That mission quickly shifted to finding the body. And now, Jesus has something else in mind, ***"...go to my brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"*** Let's remember: On Friday, nearly all of the apostles abandoned Jesus, and after everything Jesus had said about the danger of rejecting him, they are probably feeling pretty guilty at this moment. Jesus, though, addresses them as ***"my brethren,"*** and he refers to ***"my Father and your Father"*** and to ***"my God and your God."*** That's personal! In fact, I believe this is the first time Jesus refers to his disciples as being his ***"brothers."*** This, then, is Jesus' way of reassuring his followers that you are still in the family! Because of the resurrection, Jesus' followers are not just followers, but they are now brothers. The resurrection changes everything. And this is now Mary's mission: Go tell the disciples. And that is what she does. She comes, announcing to the disciples, ***"I have seen the Lord."***

Mary is faithful. She obeys. She goes and she tells. In the big picture, Mary is not a major player in the gospel accounts. She's mentioned just a handful of times, usually along with others. But Mary is important. Jesus

appears first, not to Peter and John who were just at the tomb, but Jesus waits and appears first to Mary, and Mary is the one chosen to go tell the apostles. And she obeys. In God's eyes, the most valuable servant in his kingdom is not the one who is the most famous or wealthy or powerful; no, the most valuable servant in his kingdom is the one who obeys, the one who does what the King has commanded. And that's Mary.

By the way, if you have your own copy of the Bible open (and I hope that you do), please notice the verse that comes right after this one. Where are the apostles at this point? Where did Peter and John go after leaving the empty tomb? In John 20:19, John explains that the disciples had locked themselves in a room *"for fear of the Jews."* But not Mary! Mary is on a mission: Anoint the body, then find the body and steal it back if needed, and finally: Go tell the disciples that Jesus is alive. So, we have Mary on a mission.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have focused in on Mary. And we may be able to relate to this woman. We start out doing one thing, but we find the Lord, and that mission changes (just as it did for Mary). He calls us through the gospel, and we respond through our obedience to the gospel message. And then we respond by telling others, just as she did.

Before Caleb leads us in a song, let's go to God in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God of light and life, and you are truly worthy of the worship that we have assembled together to offer up to you this morning. Thank you for making us a part of your kingdom, the church, and thank you for making us brothers and sisters in your family.

Father, we ask for your help in seeing the people around us for what they are, living souls that will spend eternity in one of two very different places. Help us to treat each person we meet just as we ourselves would like to be treated.

We come to you this morning through Jesus our Savior. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com