

2021-04-04 – Rev Esmā Collins-Marks

John 20:1-18

Let me start out with a scenario for you this morning. Every day, a gentleman went to work. Every day, he would ride the elevator all the way to the bottom floor of the high-rise apartment building that he lived in. But when he came home from work, he would ride the elevator back up to only the 6th floor. Then, he would take the stairs to his apartment many stories higher in the building. This he did every day unless it was raining. If it was raining, he would ride the elevator all the way to the floor of his apartment. Why?

Here is another one to think about. Ann is lying on the floor dead. There's broken glass and water all around her. Stuart is asleep on the couch seemingly oblivious to the death that has occurred. How did Ann die?

Did you ever play those kind of mind games where you are presented with a scene, and you have to figure out what happened to make that scene the way that it is by asking questions that can only be answered with a "yes" or "no"? Just so that you won't be trying to figure those out the rest of the morning instead of listening to what our main topic is today, I'll tell you the answers to them.

In the first one, the reason the gentleman would only go the 6th floor on his return home from work was because that was the highest button that he could reach on the elevator control panel. He was a short man. On days that it rained, he had his umbrella with him, and he could use that to punch the button that indicated his floor. In the second situation, it might help you to know that Ann is a fish, and Stuart is a cat. And the glass and water all around Ann on the floor is from her fishbowl that Stuart successfully knocked over.

Let's try one more. On Friday night, a man dies. He is buried on that same night. On Sunday morning, some friends of his arrive at the tomb where he was buried to pay their last respects only to discover that his

body is gone. What happened? That's the situation that we're going to look at this morning.

Jesus was alive. None of it made any sense. But the message was intriguing enough to provoke two of Jesus' disciples, John and Peter, to go to the tomb to see for themselves. So, John, Peter and Mary Magdalene head off to the tomb to see if they can figure out this mysterious occurrence that had happened that day. There was an empty tomb. No one doubted that part of the women's story. But what they needed to decide for themselves was why it was empty and what it all meant.

That's the same thing that you must decide. We all agree that there is an empty tomb. You wouldn't be here today if you didn't believe that. But the question is how are you going to respond to that empty tomb. How is it going to affect your life? Three different people came to the tomb that day, and each one responded in a different way.

When John heard the news, he jumped up and ran with all his might to get to the tomb. He wanted to believe. He loved Jesus. Of all the disciples, he had been the most faithful. He had been in the courtyard when Jesus was interrogated and sentenced to die. He had been at the foot of the cross when Jesus hung there dying. He had willingly taken Jesus' mother into his home to care for her. But when he got to the tomb, he did not go in. He looked inside and saw some of what Mary had said was there, but he stayed outside.

After a few minutes, Peter arrived at the tomb. Brazen Peter walked right in without the slightest hesitancy. He saw everything just as Mary had said. When Peter arrived and entered the tomb, John figured that it must be ok to enter, so he went in too. They both saw all the evidence, but they had different responses to the evidence. John saw and believed. Jesus really had risen from the dead! He had heard Jesus' prophecies about His coming death and resurrection, and now, here was the empty tomb. It was enough.

Some of us are like John. We believe because there is an empty tomb, and because there is the testimony of Christians through the centuries to the fact that Jesus is alive. We don't need to see to believe.

Peter was a little slower than John to arrive at the tomb. Maybe it was because John was younger than Peter. Or maybe it was because he too was afraid of what he might find. If Peter saw Jesus, he knew he was going to be confronted with his sin and guilt. He wasn't sure that he could handle that. Peter's vision was clouded by the pain that he felt over his past. He wanted Jesus to be alive, but he didn't know how he was going to be able to face Him.

Peter went in and examined the evidence for himself. It was enough to prove that something had happened there. But it wasn't enough to prove that Jesus was alive. He was a sceptic. He needed more evidence. Then Peter did one of the most foolish things of his whole life. He left.

Then, there was Mary Magdalene. When Peter and John left, she stayed. The angel asked a good question: "Why are you crying?" In verse 1, it says that the women including Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while "it was still dark". That not only talks about the fact that the sun hadn't risen yet. It talks about the condition of their hearts.

You who are parents know what it's like to have several different little people pulling on you at the same time all trying to get your attention to do something for them. Imagine having seven demons living inside your head constantly steering you in directions that you do not want to go. When Jesus had released her, she had found a peace that she had never known. Not only had Jesus released her from her demons, he had released her from her sin.

Mary was lost without Jesus. She had given her life to Jesus. His life had given hers meaning. Now that He was gone, she was like a lost puppy not knowing what to do or what to believe in. She thought that all that was gone, so she wept.

But then a miracle happened. Seeing the Lord – that's what Mary wanted more than anything else, and she wanted it more than anyone else did. She didn't allow the lurid comments or threats that the soldiers made at

the foot of the cross to push her away. Even though His face was covered in blood and His body was mangled from torture, she did not turn away in disgust. When His body was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb by Joseph, she stayed. And then, when the tomb was sealed with the stone rolled to the entrance, she sat outside the tomb...watching. The only thing that could pull her away was the Sabbath. But as soon as the Sabbath was over, she was back at Jesus' side again. Mary got her desire. She said, "I have seen the Lord."

Everyone here is like one of these three witnesses to the empty tomb. All three of them had been told what had happened that day – Mary had been told by the angels, and Peter and John had been told by the other women. All three saw the same tomb and examined the same evidence, and all three had different reactions.

Some of us are like John. We see the empty tomb and we believe. Jesus says that we are blessed. Rejoice that Jesus is alive. It means that we will live with Him for all eternity.

Some of us are like Peter. We see the empty tomb and we don't know what to believe. There's something going on, but we don't know what. We say, "I don't understand why people would willingly get up every Sunday morning, give up their sleep and free time and come to church." There is only one way that you will ever understand. Stick around. Don't just come at Easter. Come back again and again until you see the miracle of your own life changed. Stay a long time at the foot of the cross. Stay a long time at the empty tomb.

And then some of us are like Mary. We see the empty tomb; we see the change in people's lives and we think that there has got to be some practical explanation of what has happened. Mary didn't believe either. But she hung around long enough to have her questions answered and her faith grown. Maybe that's some of us. Either we're not quite sure about what happened on that day, or more likely, we're not sure how what happened on that day impacts our life on this day. We ask, "What does it all mean? Or, what does it all mean to me?" Since Jesus is alive, Jesus can be to you all those things that Mary thought she had lost –

release, peace, forgiveness, a sense of purpose and leadership. Maybe you're ready to believe in Jesus today. But if you're not ready, at least do this - hang around. Come back next Sunday, and the next, and the next. Come back until you see Jesus. Don't be like Peter who went away with his heart still empty. Amen.