

What Can I Say?

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A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 20: 1-18

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John 20: 1-18

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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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I got nothin’. How’s that for a way to start a sermon? I got nothin’ to say. I guess we can go home early to that nice ham dinner and some Easter candy. I mean, what can I say? What can I possibly say that would add to the story we just read from John’s Gospel?

It’s the greatest of all preachers’ confessions. We know that we can say just about anything we want on Christmas Eve and Easter morning and get away with it. You all are mostly happy when you come in here for those holidays and whatever we give you from the pulpit just adds to that joy of the holiday. There – I confessed – I’ll probably lose my preacher’s card now.

But what *can* I say? Is there anything more for anyone to say when you’re standing at the tomb which was once the home of your friend who was crucified just two days before and now you look in and it’s empty?

Thursday night we gathered in Jones Chapel around the table as we remembered that night that Jesus shared in a meal with his best friends and then walked outside to pray knowing that he would probably be arrested and tried and possibly even executed. To conclude our worship on Thursday we moved from the Chapel to the Sanctuary where we stripped the altar – an ancient tradition removing all the trappings of our public worship – the colorful paraments (altar coverings), the brass and gold and silver, the candles, the bling. And we stood in the dimness of a single Christ candle and the starkness of this space without its brightness. As we stood here I looked up at this cross hanging here and I realized and shared an insight – on Thursday, on Friday, on Saturday of Holy Week we have the hindsight which lets us know that Sunday is coming – that the Resurrection results from the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. We know that Jesus won’t be held in the tomb, we know that death does not get the victory in our story. We know, as Tony Campolo says, “It may be Friday ... but Sunday’s coming!”

But Jesus' friends, his mother and brothers, his followers, the men and women close to him who loved him and walked with him – they had no idea what was coming. As they watched and waited I'm sure they were scared, I'm sure they cried, I'm sure their stomachs were in knots, I'm sure they weren't sure who they could talk to and who they had to hide from. Imagine that feeling – your best friend dragged from his prayerful garden moment, mocked and ridiculed by the governor, stripped naked in front of 600 men (a Roman cohort), nailed to a cross. He died – they saw it.

All they could do was wait. Wait for what? What do you wait for after the death of a loved one? We have no idea what they said to each other. What could they say? It was over. He was dead. They were afraid. They might be next. But we have no clue what they said to each other those three days without Jesus. What could they say?

Nor do we know what the moment of resurrection looked like or sounded like. We can imagine the arrest, trial, the crucifixion, the laying in the tomb. We have the Gospel writers words to describe some of the agony and if anyone has watched any of the myriad of historic Jesus programs on Discovery Channel or History Channel or National Geographic Channel we clearly have no problem speculating about the details of those moments and we're happy to fill in the gaps with our imagination. But the resurrection – what happened in the tomb between Friday and Sunday is far beyond us. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of today's premier preachers puts it this way:

Any way you look at it, that is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted almost 2000 years now, and yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on that tomb, on that morning, on what did or did not happen there and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is

why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either.

The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them saw nothing at all because they were still in bed that morning, but as it turned out that did not matter because the empty tomb was not the point.

What more can I say? John's Gospel is full of drama: the race to the tomb and the irony of mistaken identity. John's are stories which celebrate faith and enshrine the message of his particular community of believers but which also give a message to our particular community of believers in the 21st century. John's words are strongly political and vibrant and beautiful. The meeting of Mary Magdalene and Jesus as she becomes the first human to encounter the Risen Jesus – “Woman, why are you weeping?” – is a powerful moment that stands alone among the many stories of belief and disbelief we read in all of the Gospels. It is story telling at its best. And John is clear about what he wants us to know – God has vindicated Jesus and that he has now initiating the new stage in God's history with humanity: the Spirit will now equip the disciples for their new ministry and by proxy God equips us as well.

All week I've had a single line from an old hymn running through my mind. Have you ever had a song get in your head and you just can't shake it? (“This is the song that never ends / it just goes on and on my friends ...”) The hymn is *How Firm a Foundation* – I had to Google the lyrics because I kept getting stuck on this line – “What more can he say / Than to you he hath said.” That's the Resurrection message isn't it?

What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen and help thee, and cause thee to stand
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

What more can Jesus say to us? What more can Jesus do to remind us that God is with us? What more can he say that would trump what happened that morning at the tomb? Nothin'! I got nothin' to add to that message.

Fred Craddock, preaching on Mark's very short retelling of the events of Resurrection morning tells it this way:

What happened at the tomb is told in five verses. The stone has been rolled away, a young man in white (an angel?) is seated inside on the right, and as would be expected when experiencing a divine revelation, the women are alarmed. The Easter message they receive is brief: do not be afraid; Jesus was crucified; he was placed here; he is not here now because he has been raised. Then they receive an Easter commission: go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee; in Galilee they will see him. This is the message Jesus had told them earlier. The response of the women is to run in terror, amazement, fear and silence.

Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus? First, let it be said that none of the Gospels provides an unambiguous, totally convincing account. Matthew says the disciples worshiped Jesus but some doubted; Luke says that in their joy they were disbelieving; and John says one of the Twelve refused to believe until he touched and felt. Faith is not coerced, even on Easter. In the New Testament, faith is response to divine revelation, and

Mark provides that from the mouth of the young man in the tomb.

Faith is not coerced, even on Easter. And please don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise, especially some preacher who just likes to hear his or her own voice. It's the experience – and the retelling of it over and over again – that convinces us, that informs our faith, that must drive our lives forward. It's not about some preachers words or some Sunday School lesson or some evangelistic “Aha!” moment. It's simplicity of the story itself that we celebrate when we worship every Sunday morning.

In his book, *The Last Laugh*, Will Willimon, who was Dean of Duke University Chapel until he was elected Bishop in the United Methodist Church, recalled being called by the student newspaper and the reporter who earnestly asked him:

“Dr. Willimon, what would you say is the goal of Easter?”

“The goal of Easter?” I asked.

“Yes,” the reporter persisted, “what is its point, its purpose? Why do you do it?”

“Well, we just do it. Easter is just, well it's just Easter. We just celebrate it . . .”

“I could see the headlines,” he said, “Dean of Chapel says Easter is pointless.”

And then he reflects, “From the utilitarian, pragmatic, serious perspective of modern people, much that we Christians do seems pointless. Even Easter. We do it for the sheer fun of it. That, modern people may one day discover, just may be the point after all.” (*The Last Laugh*, pp. 1–16).

What more can I say? What can I possibly say that would add to the power of that moment at the tomb? Anything that any of us says probably just waters down the reality of the resurrection.

Tom Long tells the story from years ago when a young boy was a great fan of Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. This little boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the TV. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly he got up and wandered from the room. His father was puzzled and followed the boy: "What is it, son? Is anything wrong?" The boy replied, "It's too good. It's just too good."

So the disciples found themselves at the empty tomb. Mary gets to the tomb and finds it empty. She runs to tell Simon Peter and he and another disciple rush to see for themselves. One disciple looks in; Simon Peter goes in. They find the burial cloths folded and lying on the slab. And then comes the Captain Kangaroo-Mister Rogers moment – they want to believe something good would come out of all this pain and agony but they can't quite manage the excitement, notes John – "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes." I imagine them shaking their heads as they walk away. "It's too good. It's just too good." Mary stays and weeps as any true friend naturally would – her friend dead and buried and now his body has been snatched.

Joan Chittister:

The old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own.

Unfortunately, we so often miss it. Jesus, you see, is already gone from one tomb. The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own, leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted and

politicians condemned. It is the greatest question of them all in a world that practices religion as an act of private devotion and sees law and government as an arm of God. ... Easter is not simply a day of celebration: It is, as well, a day of decision. What is really to be decided is whether or not we ourselves will rise from the deadening grip of this world's burnt-out systems to the light-giving time of God's coming again, this time in us.

What can I say? Nothing, really. Nothing other than a reminder to celebrate this glorious moment in whatever way possible. Run, jump, shout, cry, laugh, swallow that lump in your throat, sing, dance, clap your hands and stomp your feet. Whatever it takes to get you to accept the reality of this glorious moment – do it and live it from this day forward.

I leave you with this from *The Magnificent Defeat* by Frederick Buechner:

The proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well.
And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism
of one who has never known a time when all was not well
but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity
as well as in all its glory,
who has known one way or another what it is like
to live separated from God.
In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor.
Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives,
through him, in him.
Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and
benediction
than the wildest visionary ever dared to dream.
Christ our Lord is risen.

What can I say? It happened. It's here. Now break out of your tomb ... and go live it!

Amen.