

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 192, 208:1, 191, 202, 193.

Lessons: Isaiah 12:1-6, 1 Corinthians 15:51-57, Matthew 28:1-15.

Sermon Text: John 20:1-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

It was very early in the morning. Mary and the women couldn't wait to honor Jesus' body. This was on Sunday, the third day after Jesus had been laid into the grave. On this morning several women from the circle of the disciples started out early for the grave of the Lord. They didn't waste any time. They left home while it was dark and arrived at the tomb at dawn. John mentions especially Mary Magdalene, because the other gospel-writers had spoken of the others.

The Passover was over. They could now work again – according to the Old Testament laws. But they didn't really realize that ***“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed”*** (1 Corinthians 5:7) and that they need never sacrifice an earthly lamb again for Passover. Today please remember that

“JESUS HAD TO RISE FROM THE DEAD”

- 1. They didn't know what to make of all this**
- 2. The tomb was really empty, because Jesus had risen from the grave.**

When Mary Magdalene and the other women came within sight of the tomb of Jesus and saw that the heavy stone which fitted into the groove in front of the opening, and served in a way to lock the entrance, had been taken away, Mary didn't wait but ran back to find Peter and John.

Although John mentions only Mary by name, the one called Mary Magdalene, that is, Mary of Magdala, he recognizes that there were others, when he uses the word “we”. Her message to the men is ***“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”*** She was one of those standing near the cross up through the moment when Jesus died and she was one of those who saw Jesus put into the tomb.

The other women stayed and investigated the matter more closely, but Mary ran back to the city as quickly as she could. She first found Simon Peter and John. She quickly told them what she had seen and she also told them her conclusions. She seems to have been certain that the tomb had been broken open and the body had been removed by some one. Her conclusion is that ***“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”*** If all the disciples, men and women, had carefully remembered the prophecies of the Lord concerning his Passion and resurrection, they would have saved themselves much heartache.

Her first thought was that grave robbers – or someone – had taken Jesus' body. Why would anyone take the body of a criminal? There would be no valuables with it. We could speculate all day on why someone would steal this body, as beaten and as bloody as it was. The leaders of the Jews surely would not want the tomb empty, for if that were the case the disciples could claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

But do you see how the mind, clouded with grief operates? Mary didn't know what to think. All she knew was that the tomb was empty. Imagine your shock if you were to visit the grave of a loved one and there would be nothing but an empty hole, or empty place where the body had been placed. After all they had seen where he had been laid. They had seen what Mark had reported: ***“So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against***

the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid." (Mark 15:46-47)

Peter and John were the first ones she found. Because John had helped get Peter into the courtyard of the high priest, it is likely that they had spent some time together in the past three days, talking and thinking about what had happened. They rushed to the tomb. Surely they were wondering what had happened, for ***"They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."***

John reports that he outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first. But he hesitated at the entrance to the tomb. He merely stooped down and looked into the partial darkness of the cave-like tomb. He could not make up his mind to enter.

Peter, the impetuous one, is a man of action. No doubt there was also in his mind the troubling fact he had denied even knowing Jesus. Surely he was especially troubled by that sin of denial. Those denials were his last public thoughts and actions toward the dead Christ. He had not yet heard the word of forgiveness from the Lord.

When Peter came to the tomb, there was not a moment's hesitation. Peter went in and ***"he saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen."*** He went into the tomb; he looked closely at the grave-cloths, and he also noticed that part of the linen wrappings was lying apart from the other linen wrappings, in a place by itself, and that it was folded up. Despite the legend of the shroud of Turin, which claims Jesus was buried in one large sheet, the custom of the Jews would have had linen strips or bands wrapped around the body, with spices – the 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes – layered in with the cloth. But part of the cloth was folded up separately. John explains that this was the linen cloth or `napkin which was wrapped around the head of Jesus. No doubt Peter, who was inside the cave-like tomb, at first told these facts to John, who was outside the tomb, until John finally came in to see the evidence in the tomb with his own eyes. ***"Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed."*** It was certainly surprising to find all the cloths laid there with such apparent care, with no sign of haste, as would have been the case had the sepulcher been broken into and the body stolen.

But there was no grave robbery. Why would robbers have taken such care to leave the wrappings of the body behind? Things were too neat.

Peter left the tomb bewildered. But the fact was that the Resurrection of Jesus had taken place just as he said it would. He had risen from the dead.

God's angels had reported to the women what happened, as the other evangelists report. Matthew tells us: ***"The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him. Now I have told you.'"*** (Matthew 28:5-7)

Mark writes: ***"'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"*** (Mark 16:6-7)

And Luke tells us: ***"While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"*** (Luke 24:4-7)

In our sermon text you also heard that an angel had also spoken to Mary after John and Peter left.

The evidence was obvious. Jesus was not here. He had risen. He had come back to life, just as he'd said.

What John saw forced him to one conclusion: Jesus Himself had laid aside these wrappings; He had risen; He had returned to life, even though John, along with the other apostles, at that time did not have the complete understanding of the Scriptures concerning the resurrection of Jesus. They didn't yet understand that it was a necessary part of God's plan of redemption. They didn't yet understand that it must happen to complete and prove Jesus' work for the salvation of mankind. Neither disciple at this time fully realized what he had

seen. Jesus' body had not decayed in the grave, just as the Psalmist had promised: ***"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."*** (Psalm 16:9-10) The body of the Son of God had not been left in the grave to decay.

And all these facts from the Word of God should be enough to convince any reasonable critic of the resurrection of Jesus. The empty tomb, the careful order in the grave, the absence of any and every indication of robbery. But many choose to deny the facts and to doubt and not believe. As you heard in our Gospel lesson, the chief priests started a cover-up, a lie which began all the lies which continue to this day about Jesus' resurrection. Matthew tells us ***"While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'*** So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. ***And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day."*** (Matthew 28:11-15)

Peter and John and Mary didn't realize what they were seeing. They were first-hand witnesses of Jesus' Resurrection. But we shouldn't be too hard on them and their lack of faith. How often don't we fail to realize what God is telling us? We try to find human explanations for everything – even for things that are plainly told us in God's word. In our age we want to know, we want to understand, we want proof, but some things – many things, in fact, – we must take on faith.

They had seen the fulfillment of Holy Scripture. They were the first human witnesses of the fact that Jesus ***"was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."*** (Romans 4:25) They had seen first-hand that ***"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."*** (1 Corinthians 15:20)

This is the faith of the Christian: all who believe in Jesus as their Savior place their own hope of salvation upon the miracle of Christ's resurrection. The victory of the grave is turned into defeat; the sting of death is taken away. Ours is the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

It is plainly true, as the scripture says: ***"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."*** (1 Corinthians 15:54-58)

Peter, and John, and even Mary Magdalene had much work to do for Jesus. Their lives would bring forth many fruits of their faith. We, too, have work to do as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Remember the admonition of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:58: ***"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."*** Amen.