

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

EASTER SUNDAY

A Message to the Broken

(John 20)

Introduction: Bad news, good news...

I believe that good news can only really be appreciated against the backdrop of bad news.

- The news that Manu Ginobili was ready to play against the Grizzlies in the first round of the playoffs was only tremendous news for Spurs fans who have been holding their breaths ever since he went down with a sprained right elbow against Phoenix.
- Getting a clean bill of health from your doctor isn't much of a big deal - unless you have suspected that you have a serious illness.
- Landing a job is exceptionally good news only if you've been out of a job for a while.

If it is true that good news can best be appreciated against the backdrop of bad news, then the good news of Easter Sunday will only be fully appreciated against the backdrop of the preceding Friday and Saturday.

Today, we are going to follow the faith journey of three people who suffered through a terrible "Good Friday" and were ushered into the new world of Easter.

Each one of their stories has something to say to each one of us. And I'm going to ask that even if you are hearing this story for the fiftieth time, you hear it this morning as if for the very first time.

So, to review -

- Jesus was crucified on Friday, a day that was both the Jewish Sabbath AND the day of the annual Jewish Passover feast.
- Jesus was buried in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the embalming not finished because of the arrival of the Sabbath.

For the disciples of Jesus, Friday and Saturday were days of interminable bad news. Their worlds were shattered. And after placing Jesus' body in the tomb late on Friday, they left to walk back to their homes to observe the Sabbath.

We would have to agree that as that Friday ended, it couldn't get much worse.

Then came Sunday...

As soon as she arrived at the tomb on Sunday morning, one of His followers jumped to the conclusion that things have gotten much, much worse.

This would be Mary Magdalene, one of several "Marys" mentioned in the Gospels, a woman from whom Jesus had once cast seven demons.¹

Doubt Turns to Faith at the Tomb (20:1-18)

What Peter and John DIDN'T See at the Tomb (vv. 1-10)

Mary found something unusual at the tomb (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene² came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.

This morning, the youth praise band was up well before morning light to prepare to lead worship at the sunrise service.

¹ See Luke 8:2. There is no necessary reason to identify her with the immoral woman of Luke 7.

² The other gospels mention several women coming to the tomb, but John's account doesn't negate that. He just emphasizes the presence of Mary Magdalene.

So were the rest of those who attended the service at OP Schnabel Park. That's when Mary arrived at Joseph's tomb. Early. Really early.

Now, for what purpose did Mary go to the tomb?

There is no doubt that it was to finish preparing the body of Jesus, that work having been interrupted by the start of the Sabbath on Friday.

If Mary had pre-thought anything, she was probably expecting that the soldiers would help her roll away the stone from the front of the tomb.

Imagine her shock, then, upon arrival, to have seen the stone already rolled away from the front of the tomb.³ Immediately, she jumped to a conclusion (and not to the conclusion you think), *"It's worse than I thought. Jesus is not just dead. Someone has stolen His body!"*

Mary ran from the tomb straight to where she knew she would find Simon Peter and John, the two leading disciples.

Now I suspect that if we could run psychological tests on these two guys at this particular moment, we'd discover that they were, using somewhat technical verbiage, really messed up.

John had remained at the foot of the cross all the way to the end, late on Friday afternoon. He watched Jesus die. John would have been completely wrung out. Overwhelmed with grief.

Peter had not been there at the end. He had been off somewhere by himself, weeping over his failure of nerve at having denied Jesus three times in the High Priest's courtyard.

If John was exhausted and wrung out, Peter is overwhelmed with grief and guilt. Mary burst in and they listened up.

[2] So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved⁴, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

As soon as they hear her report, they took off running straight for the tomb. Yes, you heard right. These two emotionally drained men ran.

John and Peter inspected the tomb (vv. 3-10)

[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

Contrary to some speculation, there is no evidence that Peter was in his mid-50's, had bad knees, and suffered from asthma. There is no reason given as to why John ran faster than Peter, although John was certainly the younger man.

John reached the tomb before Peter.

[5] and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in.

A few moments later, Peter came up behind him, huffing and puffing after his early morning jog.

But Peter didn't join John and hang around outside the tomb. He barged right on in (Peter was a "barge-right-on-in" kind of guy!).

[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.

The first thought that hit Peter had to have been, *"This is not the work of grave robbers!"*

³ Literally, it was "lifted up" (*αἵρω*) out of its tracks.

⁴ It is interesting that John still can think of no better way to refer to himself than as the disciple whom Jesus loved. This is the way he defined himself.

The scene was neat and orderly. Grave robbers would have left a mess behind and taken the body, clothes and all.

But the face cloth was lying separate from the body wrappings, as if someone (Someone) had carefully rolled it up and placed it by itself on purpose.

And it is not as if Jesus' body had become animated, and then He unwrapped Himself from the yards and yards of wrappings. It seems instead that the wrappings of linen had simply been evacuated!

Almost instantly, John joined Peter in the tomb. Just as instantly, John and Peter jointly believed.

[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.

Isn't that interesting? As often as they had heard Jesus tell them about it, His words had never quite sunk in to any of them.

Mary had jumped to the conclusion of a grave-robbing. And it was only when they saw an emptied out tomb that Peter and John were convinced. Jesus' short-lived death came as a surprise to all of them.

After a couple of stunned moments of taking it all in, the two apostles filed out of the cave, in awe-struck wonder.

[10] So the disciples went away again to their own homes.⁵

Notice, so far nobody has seen Jesus. All Peter and John have seen is an empty tomb and some evacuated grave clothes. Yet, they believed.

⁵ The language of the original text doesn't demand that we say that they went to their "homes." Only that they returned to the places where they were staying, for they didn't own homes in Jerusalem. And, let's remember with whom John was now living - Mary, the mother of Jesus. That means that John must have been the one to tell Mary that her Son, Jesus, was alive.

No, of course they didn't immediately start proclaiming the resurrection to a lost world. But, they did re-enter the world of faith because in an abandoned tomb, Jesus' once-cryptic words about resurrection now make perfect sense. ("Oh, so that's what He meant!")

Having run to the tomb, Peter and John walk away, leaving Mary by herself at the tomb.

See, she had followed them from where they were in the city back to the grave.

She watched them leave, not knowing what they had not seen inside. Now, she is alone in the cemetery, alone with her grief over Jesus' death and the multiplied tragedy of a missing body.

What Mary DID SEE at the Tomb (vv. 11-18)

Mary looked inside the tomb (vv. 11-12)

[11a] But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping

The Greek word used to describe her weeping is the word for loud wailing. She was beside herself with grief, and then was beside herself with a need to know.

She wonders. What did those men see in the tomb that sent them scurrying off?

Mary poked her head into the tomb, perhaps expecting to see a chaotic mess. She almost certainly didn't expect to see what she saw.

[11b]...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.⁶

⁶ As we read this account, it is difficult to square the facts of Jesus burial with the famous Shroud of Turin, which has been argued to have been Jesus' burial shroud. The Shroud of Turin is a body length linen sheet, which includes the head of whoever was buried there. Here, John specifically states that the headpiece was

The angels broke the silence.

Mary talked with angels! (v. 13)

[13a] And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

On this morning, everyone was confused. Peter, John, Mary - even the angels. Think about it and you'll understand their confusion at Mary's weeping.

They understood that this was the one most inappropriate moment in all of human history for weeping! The angels know that all is well with the universe.

But Mary thought she had good reason to weep and explained (did she even recognize that they were angels?) why she was so upset.⁷

[13b]...She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

Again, there is NO expectation of a resurrection.

Then, maybe Mary heard something. Her attention was drawn to something outside the tomb where she saw a man standing.

Mary talked with - and recognized - Jesus (vv. 14-16)

[14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.⁸

The as-yet-unrecognized Jesus spoke, asking here the same question the angels had asked, plus one more.

[15] Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”⁹

Her answer makes it clear that nothing is clear to her.

[15b]...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.”

Mary certainly would have had a tough time carrying Jesus' body away. But then, she wasn't calculating her weight-carrying capacity. She was still too lost in grief to do much productive figuring.

Jesus listened to Mary and knew that she was near the end of her emotional rope. So, He rescued her. He rescued her by speaking her name.

[16] Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).¹⁰

From what Jesus goes on to say, Mary must have immediately dropped down to cling to His feet in desperate worship.

But, He had a job for her to accomplish.

Mary's commission (vv. 17-18)

[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.’”

separate. It does not appear that John is describing a whole linen sheet, either, but strips of cloth.

⁷ Is verse 13 the only place in the Bible where a person meets with an angel and does not fall on his or her face?

⁸ Luke 24:37; Luke 24, and the discussion along the Emmaus Road show others who knew Jesus well, but didn't recognize Him in His resurrection body.

⁹ “*WHAT* are you seeking?” might have been what she expected. “I'm seeking a *what?* A *corpse*.” But, Jesus asked, “*WHOM*.....?”

¹⁰ Here is the truth of John, chapter 10, demonstrated in living color. There, Jesus had said, “*The sheep here the shepherd's voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.*” (v. 3) And again, “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*” (v. 27). Mary Magdalene was a true sheep of the Good Shepherd. When He called her name, she knew Him! She replied in Aramaic, the language most familiar to her, “*My Teacher!*”

Thus commissioned, Mary was off like a shot, obedient to Jesus' command, to tell the men who had been following Jesus the great news!

[18] Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.

So, Peter and John were the first to see Jesus' absence. Mary got to be the first to see His presence. And THAT is the first of a series of critical scenes we get to see this Easter morning.

Following this early morning scene, there is a gap of several hours in John's telling of the story.

Can you imagine what these three did for the rest of the day? What filled the remainder of the morning? Of the afternoon? Well, we aren't told, and we don't see them again until they and others have come together in the evening.

Peter, John, and Mary now believe. But the mood in the room where the disciples have all gathered is far from triumphant.

At least ten of them (and probably a few more) are huddled together on this Sunday evening. There is a hopeless solidarity. They are controlled by fear.

Fear Turns To Faith (by Stages) in a Locked Room (vv. 19-29)

Jesus Brought Faith and Peace to [ten] Disciples (vv. 19-23)

[19] So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." [20] And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [21] So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." [22] And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

We are not told how He entered a room with shut and locked doors. Evidently, Master locks are not a problem for the resurrected Lord Jesus.

Here, for the first time since that last supper on Thursday evening the disciples find themselves face to face with Jesus. What kind of words do you suppose they might have expected from Him?

If it had been me, I would have expected,

"You cowards! How could you have let Me down like you did!? What a bunch of weaklings! In the hour of My greatest suffering, You all just ran away. All you could think about was your precious skin. Peter, how could you have denied Me? James, Andrew, Nathanael - all of you, why did you just scatter into the night when they came for Me?"

And who could have blamed Him for blasting them? But there was no scolding. Instead of blasting, Jesus blessed them, ***"Peace be with you."***

Then, rolling back his sleeves, and pulling apart His robe, He gave them proof that He was who they thought He was.

He showed them His nailed-pierced hands and feet.

Isn't it fascinating that God did not do away with the scars after Jesus was raised from the dead? Evidently, God considers the crucifixion scars beauty marks.

When Jesus spoke to His now energized band of followers, He equipped them with precisely the gifts they would need in the days ahead.

The presence of the Holy Spirit, peace, and power - and with that, He left.

Can you imagine the electricity in the air as the disciples began to discuss what they had just experienced? It would have been wild!

They must have been ecstatic! All of them who were there, that is, because they were not all there.

One key disciple had not been present - Thomas. He did show up later, though, and when he did the others were eager to tell him the incredible news.

Jesus Brought Thomas to Faith, too (vv. 24-29)

Thomas' response to the report of the ten (vv. 24-25)

[24] But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. [25a] So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!"

Listen to his response and you'll understand how we got the catchphrase, "Doubting Thomas."

[25b]...But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Thomas' skepticism is impressive for its resoluteness. Despite the testimony of His closest friends, he wasn't biting.

Thomas simply figured that after all he had seen on Thursday and Friday, seeing - and ONLY seeing - was believing. What his friends were telling him ("Jesus is alive!") was just "*too good to be true.*"

Still, we dare not miss the exact wording of Thomas' comment - "**I WILL NOT believe.**" His refusal to believe was, at some level, a matter of the will.

Thomas had been crushed by the crucifixion. He wasn't going to allow himself to accept some happy nonsense about a resurrection so easily. His motto was one we've all come to know and love, "*Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*"

Well, Jesus didn't leave Thomas hanging for long. About a week later, when the group was together again - this time including Thomas - Jesus joined them again.

Thomas - convinced, and believing! (vv. 26-29)

[26] After eight days¹¹ His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."

Same situation. Same room. Same closed doors. Same group - plus Thomas.

After speaking the same words of blessing, Jesus turned directly to Thomas and invited him to carry out his earlier threat.¹²

[27] Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

With such an incredible miracle standing right in front of him, Thomas did the only reasonable (but not the only possible!) thing. Expressing a fully-formed faith, he worshipped Jesus.

[28] Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

To this point, nobody had ever called Jesus "God." Thomas is the first one to take the easy step from "*He is risen!*" to "*He is God!*"

We want to yell, "*Way to go, Thomas!*" And he did make a great confession. But Jesus reserves greater commendation for those who would respond as Thomas did with less tangible evidence.

Jesus blesses the unseeing believers (v. 29)

[29] Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

¹¹ Eight days, counting inclusively, making the setting the following Sunday evening. If we begin with Monday, He appears to the disciples on the following Monday.

¹² No doubt, Thomas was duly impressed that Jesus even knew about the threat of the week before. The stress is on Jesus' omniscience, as Jesus let Thomas know that He knew what he had said on the previous Sunday!

In other words, blessed are Peter and John, who believed when they saw an empty tomb. And blessed are YOU when you believe on the basis of the evidence without seeing the resurrected Jesus with your own eyes!

Conclusion:

Easter Sunday morning speaks to the broken among us, those who...

- **like Thomas, have been burned and are leery of trusting again, those who doubt.**

In your private moments, do you ever wish that you could see the same sight that Thomas saw? Do you ever wish that you could actually **SEE** Jesus?

All of us probably have that longing at one level. But Jesus values our *“believing without seeing.”* It’s not a fact-less faith He wants, but it does please God when we believe on the basis of His promise. Period.

You long to see Jesus - GREAT! Just don’t turn your desire to see Him into a demand that He show up at the snap of your fingers, at your beck and call. That is to fall into *Thomas-ism*.

God smiles when we hear His promise, evaluate the evidence and then give Him our trust without seeing. Easter Sunday is great news for the Thomasses among us.

It’s also great news for Mary Magdalene and others who mourn.

- **like Mary, have suffered pain, grief, and loss.**

After having told Peter and John that the tomb was empty, and after they had left her all alone in the cemetery, Mary was weeping. That’s not surprising. That’s what people do in cemeteries.

She was weeping for the same reason many people weep beside graves. Her world was undone. She was filled with sorrow because someone she loved was dead.

As much as anyone on that Passover weekend, she had seen her dreams crash and burn, her hopes go up in smoke when she had watched Jesus die.

Unlike the disciples, who were hoping for a political coup and a military triumph over Rome with King Jesus on the throne, Mary had just wanted to be with Jesus. She loved Him.

But now He’s gone, and she was drowning in grief. Some of you have come near to drowning in your grief.

- You have been rocked to the core by a devastating loss.
- You have experienced sorrow over tragedy, unrelenting pain at the unfairness of life.
- You have suffered the loss of relationship with a loved one - through death or divorce.
- You have watched as friends move away - to a different state or to run in different circles.
- You have mourned the loss of your children’s innocence, or the loss of your own childhood innocence.
- You have lost material riches.
- You have said goodbye too soon to parents and grandparents, to friends, to children.

We understand what Mary was feeling in the cemetery when we watch the tears roll down her face, because we’ve been there.

I am not going to suggest this morning that Jesus takes away the pain and sorrow of life. I’ll be honest and tell you that He doesn’t.

But, Jesus’ resurrection does give us a new grid through which we view our grief. There is comfort to be found in our sorrow when we remember that a risen Savior walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

Take your sorrow to Jesus. He brings comfort to those who mourn. Give Him your trust and He will see you through.

So, Easter Sunday provides just the thing that the Marys and the Thomas' among us need. Jesus' resurrection speaks to the grief-stricken and the doubting among us.

But Easter also speaks to anyone who has walked in the sandals of Simon Peter.

- **like Simon Peter, have failed and wonder if there is a way back.**

Having three nights earlier three times denied knowing Jesus, Peter would have been filled with self-contempt. All of his worst fears about himself had been confirmed.

But, on that first Easter Sunday morning, when Mary told Peter that Jesus' tomb was empty he ran - RAN! - to the tomb.

I believe that Mary's report of an empty tomb rekindled a spark of hope in his guilt-racked soul.

Folks, when you and I go off in wrong directions, when we shoot ourselves in the foot, when we sin, when we make awful choices that we regret with tears (and who among us does not?), is there a better place to go than to an empty tomb - the place that shouts, "JESUS IS ALIVE"?

Both the place of the cross and the place of the tomb are sacred sites upon which we can rebuild broken lives.

In Peter's brokenness over his failure, the message of resurrection equipped him with hope to build again.

The same is true for you and me! Jesus is alive. And because He is alive, anything is possible. Even the shattered pieces of our broken lives can be put back together.

Do you find a little bit of Simon Peter, Mary, and Thomas when you look in the mirror? I do.

At times, I am underwhelmed at my own steadfastness and overwhelmed with my failures and sin. At other times, I'm filled with sorrow at the world's troubles AND my own troubles. And there are more than a few moments when I am tempted to NOT entrust myself to God. I want to not believe.

But there stands that lovely cross and there stands that stark, empty tomb. Irrefutable historical facts that won't go away any more than Jesus' perfect love and presence simply won't go away.

Today, we remember that we serve and worship a living, risen Savior who is completely trustworthy. And today we affirm that He makes all the difference!

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!