

John 20:1 to 18 – 8.0 am Easter Sunday

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.

Mary Magdalene was with Jesus' mother Mary comforting her when Jesus was crucified at Calvary, and here in our reading this morning from John's gospel we read that she was the first person to go to Jesus' grave, such was her love for him.

Mary Magdalene never forgot how Jesus had transformed her life, by driving out her demons that terrorised her day and night, and restored her life to one of normality, tranquillity and stability; and as a result she loved Jesus and clearly there was nothing that she wouldn't do for him, both in life and in death.

Now early on Easter Sunday Mary, finding the tomb empty, ran back to tell Peter that somebody had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb. Significantly, although Peter had denied knowing Jesus a little while ago, nevertheless Mary still looked to Peter when there was a problem that needed attention.

Archaeologists have in recent times discovered a decree of the emperor Claudius which has been uncovered at Nazareth, dated some years later, prescribing execution for those removing bodies from graves, so Mary can be forgiven in thinking that's what's happened in this case.

Peter and John ran to the tomb, but John being a younger man got to the tomb first, but like Mary showed deference for Peter by waiting for him to go in first, but he did look in, and he saw the grave clothes lying there.

In verse 8 we are told that John then went in and believed. The question is what did he believe, because verse 9 which follows reads, "For as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead."

When Peter went in he just looked around him in amazement that the tomb was empty and just noted that the grave clothes were still there, but John, when he went in, saw something different.

He saw the grave clothes and immediately realised that if it were grave robbers who had taken Jesus then they would have just taken him away clothes and all; they wouldn't have left the grave clothes behind, and they certainly wouldn't have tidied them up.

Incidentally some commentaries say that the grave clothes which were still folded and in the right relative positions, means that Jesus just passed through them, in much the same way that he later appeared in a locked room.

So John did not believe Mary when she said somebody has taken our Lord, but he did believe that Jesus had got out of the tomb on his own, so he knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, but what he yet did not understand was the significance of that, because as yet he did not realise that Jesus had purposely died for the sake of the whole human race.

That of course is not at all surprising because that step in believing that Jesus died for us was and still is a huge step that even today the majority of people in this country cannot make, because that step does not rely on logic but on faith.

We of course here today, through the grace of God have made that connection through faith, we, if you like have passed our eleven plus we now have to be taught to understand the full implications of Jesus' death which is why we come to church, and why we should all study the Bible probably more than we do.

Mary not only told Peter and John what she thought happened she also went back to the grave, but not being able to keep up with them arrived after Peter and John had left, we are then told that she was at the grave weeping.

For Mary, the loss of the body was the last straw, even her mourning for Jesus is violated, as she thought by grave robbers.

Now as she wept she also looked into the tomb, and as she looked and wept she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head one at the feet, now in life Jesus had been crucified between two robbers, in death he had lain between two angels, and they asked her why she was weeping.

Her reply tells us that she still believed that grave robbers had taken Jesus' body away, but when she turned away from the angels she saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was him.

Now why she didn't recognise Jesus is a mystery, it could easily have been that through her tears she was unable to recognise anybody, and in any case Jesus was positively the last person she expected to see; the point is she didn't and instead took him for the gardener.

Jesus then said to her, "Why are you weeping?" "For whom are you looking?" In asking, 'Mary why are you weeping', suggests that Jesus didn't know.

From the perspective of heaven nothing is more out of place than tears for someone who has died. Like the rest of us, we mourn for ourselves; our loved ones have the joy of heaven.

Mary then asked Jesus, who she thought to be the gardener, if he had taken his body away and if so where had he put him.

Jesus replied "Mary!" And then comes the moment of recognition. One word that changed her life for ever and that word was her own name.

This is a memorable confirmation of the personal nature of our Lord's dealings with each and everyone of us that Christ knows us all by our names, and Mary responds with joy and says Rabboni meaning teacher.

In John chapter 10:3 we read, "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Our Lord knows each and everyone of us by name, and loves all of us as he did Mary.

As we sit let us pray,  
Father God, you called us and saved us in order to make us like your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Change us, day by day, by the work of your Holy Spirit so that we may grow more like him in all that we think and say and do, to his glory.

Amen