

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 (p. 933)

APRIL 4, 2021

JOHN 20:1-18 (p. 880)

BLAINE

EASTER SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Thank you for the gift of Easter morning Lord! And thank you for the overwhelming love behind it! Pour out your Spirit upon us today, so that we might grasp this gift's Eternal Significance! Reach out and touch our hearts Lord, and cause us to reach out to others! For we ask these things in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen!

“RUNNING TO THE EMPTY TOMB”

I've been thinking about Easter Morning. Big shock, right? It's Holy Week! Go figure! But I've been thinking in particular, about how people respond to Easter Morning. What they do, and why they do it! Even "how" they do it! Have you ever thought about that? I mean, why are you here? What are your expectations this morning? What do you think Mary's expectations were, as she walked to the Garden Tomb in the pre-dawn light? Or Peter's, or John's, as they ran? How about the rest of the Disciples? What were they thinking? Or all the Jews in Jerusalem for Passover, the Roman Soldiers, or folks today? How do people respond to Easter Morning?

For some, I imagine, it's kind of like coming home. Family members are often here. Out of town guests. Or at least, they were in previous years. Snow Birds have usually returned, or soon will. Spring Vacations are winding down, right? So, does Easter Morning feel like coming home!

But even that raises questions, doesn't it! Maybe more questions than it answers! What does coming home feel like? There has to be different ways to do that, as well, right! And your expectations, I imagine, would have a lot to do with what you'll find when you get there! Think about it. What is it that you are looking for? Or better yet, as Jesus asks Mary, who is it that you are looking for?

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the Tomb and found that it was empty! The stone covering the entrance, a stone that would have been somewhere between four and six-feet in diameter, a bolder really, has been rolled away! That stone would have been in trough, cut out of the bedrock, a trough that ran downhill. It would have required considerable effort to roll it back up again, and block it into place.

And there were Roman Solders there, who were told by the Governor to "make the Tomb as secure as you know how", according to Matthew's Gospel. Officially Seal it, he said. Which according to sources outside of the Bible, would have been with a string or cord embedded in wax, sealed by Pilate himself! Those soldiers, by-the-way, were commanded to guard that Tomb "under penalty of death"! So, what do you think Mary was expecting to see?

According to Luke, Mary wasn't alone. She came with some friends, bringing spices to anoint the body. They saw where it was placed after the Crucifixion. But they couldn't properly prepare it for burial between sundown on Friday and sundown on Saturday because that's the Sabbath, a day kept Holy for the Lord!

And I can't even imagine them going out on Saturday night, in the dark, can you? Not with all the Roman Soldiers around! Not with all the strangers in town for the Passover Feast! Women, walking alone in the city streets in the dark! That would be absurd! So early in the morning, on the First Day of the Week, most likely filled with grief, Mary heads out to where they buried Jesus. What in the world was she expecting to see?

Do you think she was simply performing some kind of "Religious Obligation"? You know, fulfilling her duty to a friend? I mean, some of us can relate to that, right? It's Easter Morning and we are here performing a religious obligation! Or possibly fulfilling our duty to a family member or friend. We are observing a "ritual", right, a time-honored ritual"! That's why we are here! That's the only expectation we have this today!

And for some, it may feel like an Empty Tomb. It's dark and gloomy, maybe, and quiet. Or the people are dark and gloomy, maybe, and quiet. It seems devoid of life! Dead! Like a Tomb, really! Which at a minimum ought to make us stop and think! What do those bringing spices see, when they come to the place where Jesus is supposed to be?

Historians all pretty much agree these days, those outside of the Bible, as well as those within! The followers of Jesus witnessed some amazing things! This Rabbi, this Teacher healed the sick, and socialized with the unacceptable! He comforted those who were in distress, and distressed those who were comfortable! Jesus hung out with men and women alike, educated and uneducated, business owners and slaves, even Roman Soldiers! He was amazing!

Jesus broke bread with both sinners and tax collectors, on a regular basis! He shared meals with the politically connected and the religious elite. He taught the young and the old! And did so, with such vivid stories and word pictures, with parables and such! Jesus made the Truth come alive! He preached like there was no tomorrow, and even warned that one day there would be no tomorrow! And He did all this, right up to the time He got into all that trouble with the authorities! How would knowing all that, change your perspective? What is it that you are expecting to see?

Is it possible that Easter Morning is simply a commemoration of an extraordinary, three-year ministry? Is your “Trip to the Tomb” a celebration of a “Life Well Lived”? Is this just an annual Retirement Party for a fantastic Teacher or Preacher? I mean, Jesus was arguably one of the greatest Humanitarians who ever lived, correct! A great Moral Example of what it means to love others! So, what do you see, as you peer across the threshold and into the Tomb? What do you expect to see? It’s a good question, isn’t it?

Given who Jesus is, what He taught, how He lived, what is it, exactly, that we should expect to see? What should we expect from Jesus? What should Jesus expect from us? What’s our role, here today, on what can only be described as the Day the Church was born? You can see why I’ve been wondering, can’t you?

Are we just here to share in prayer? You know, pay our respects? Are we here to process past the Tomb maybe, and weep in grief, remembering the world’s loss, or our own personal loss?

Are you like Peter maybe, who initially walked away shaking his head at what he saw, more confused than anything? Or more like John, who at first started running to the Tomb, eager and excited! But then stopped dead in his tracks when he got there, afraid to venture further in, not sure of what he might see? Tell me, have you ever sprinted to Church? I like that image! Or have you ever sprinted to Church only to discover that Jesus was not there? That one bothers me!

I keep trying to put myself into the text, and to see others there as well! I mean, it's Easter Morning! So, can you relate to some of the other Disciples, maybe, who on Easter Morning were off on the fringes somewhere, confused, more or less cowering in fear? Afraid of what those around you might think, or do, if you truly share what's on your heart? Where are you in Easter story?

It wasn't that long ago that large crowds welcomed Jesus, with open arms, in fact, and shouts of "Hosanna", as He came to them as Messiah! But then, over time, something happened! What they expected to find, or what they wanted to find, or what they thought they ought to find, wasn't what Jesus turned out to be! Only rather than adjust to the truth, they instead, backed off to the sidelines.

What kind of King allows Himself to be tortured, and beaten, and mocked? Why would "God in the Flesh" put up with such humiliation and degradation? Why would He allow them to make Him wear a Crown of Thorns!

In that agonizing death by Crucifixion, Jesus took upon Himself the full fury of God's wrath for our sins! And yet, the vast majority of professed Believers, on that first Easter morning, were just standing off in the distance, with only an occasional sideways glance at the Empty Tomb! So, what changed? How did they go from there, to willingly facing persecution themselves, to spreading the Good News to the very ends of the known world! What caused them to change? What would cause us to change? You know, from wherever we currently are, into who the Lord is calling us to be?

Early in the morning, Mary left the protective wall of the darkened city and made her way to the burial site, only to discover that the stone had been removed! She immediately left and went running to find the others. Apparently, she too was confused.

She had watched as Jesus was Crucified, saw it with her own eyes. She looked on, as the Roman soldier pierced His side with a spear. And listened, as that soldier proclaimed that Jesus was dead! She saw them take his body down from the Cross. She knew that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped it in burial linen and laid Him in the Tomb! She most likely watched as they rolled that two to four-thousand-pound stone into place! And saw it sealed with that "Official Government Seal"! But now the Tomb is empty! So, Mary goes running to the other Disciples for help! Sometimes, we just need a little help!

I'll bet they were all a bundle of emotions, don't you? Most of the Disciples had given up their livelihoods, their jobs and their futures, in order to join this ministry team. They had seen multitudes fed with a couple of fish and few of loaves of bread. They had witnessed demons cast out of people, blind people given their sight, lame people enabled to walk again, and jump and shout! They witnessed Jesus walk on the water! And one of them, with Jesus' encouragement, even did it himself! They watched as Jesus calmed the wind and the waves with just a verbal command! They have seen extraordinary things! But now their leader is dead! The Romans, the greatest army the world has ever known, has shattered their Messianic dreams!

They had expectations you know! They were convinced how the Kingdom of God was supposed to unfold! But now, things are different, very different! I'll bet some of them were frustrated, don't you think, or angry even! I'll bet some of them were ready to walk away, or maybe even run! Two of them, in fact, decided to actually leave town. That very day they took off for the village of Emmaus! And the rest, the core of the group, the leadership really, well, they chose to lock themselves away in the Upper Room!

They were facing a loss! And I think it's fair to say that we have all had loss!

Disappointments too, and un-met expectations! We've all had leaders, in the Church even, or entire Churches maybe, or loved ones in the Church, who have let us down!

We've all come to the place where we thought Jesus was, only to discover that He was gone! And when that happens, believe me, there is a great temptation to just hole-up at home, in your room, or to pack up all your troubles and just leave!

I imagine that's how Mary felt, as well as the others, don't you, as they stood there in the pre-dawn light, outside of the empty Tomb. So again, what changed?

You know the facts! You've heard the eyewitness reports! So, is seeing the Empty Tomb enough for you? How about if you were to personally talk with two angels, two messengers from God, who were sitting inside of the Tomb? Matthew tells us that darkness covered the land from noon until three, on the day Jesus was Crucified. He also says that the Curtain in the Great Temple, the one separating the Holy of Holies, separating God from man, was torn in two, from the top to the bottom! He writes, that as Jesus died, there were earthquakes, and many tombs were opened, and the bodies of many Holy people were raised to life! Would experiencing any of that, do it for you?

What if you saw the strips of burial linen lying there, or the burial napkin that was around Jesus' head, folded up neatly, and set off by its self? What if you knew the old Hebrew custom about Napkins, that whenever a servant set out dinner for his master, he would wait just out of sight until the master was finished eating. Only when he knew for sure that the master was done, would he start to clear the table. And the signal for this standard etiquette practice, was that when the master was done, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers and his mouth, clean his beard, and then wad up his napkin, and toss it onto the table. That was the cue, to go ahead and clean up.

However, if the master folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, where it originally was, that meant something else entirely. A folded napkin told the servant, "I'm not finished yet. I'm coming back". John says that "burial cloth was still lying in its place"! What if you were aware of that custom, like all of the Disciples would have been? Would seeing that folded napkin, in the Tomb, be enough?

You know, maybe? I think all of these things would have helped. And I think later, all of them would have jelled in your mind, and became clear. But most people are skeptics, aren't they? I know I am! So, let's be honest! Seeing the Empty Tomb probably wouldn't cause an absolute conviction of the Resurrection, would it! No, that truth requires experiencing the Risen Lord!

John, if you recall, sprinted to the Tomb. And when he finally looked inside, he immediately believed! So, he took off running to share the Good News. But Peter, the Rock, isn't so sure. Luke even says that "he went away, wondering to himself what had happened"! And Mary, well, it appears as if she starts out in denial! "Who rolled the stone away? Where have they taken Him? What am I going to do with all of these spices?" But she stayed, didn't she! And she started asking those tough questions that were stirring in her heart!

You can call it whatever you want; tenacity, courage, hard headedness, stamina, determination, or faith! But the truth is she stayed, even though she was confused! And as a result, she had an encounter with the Risen Lord! What does that say to us?

And those two Disciples, by-the-way, the ones I mentioned earlier, the two who were running away to Emmaus, they encountered Jesus as well! They didn't recognize Him at first, traveling down the road. But after breaking bread with Him, after sitting in His Presence, they too came to understand. And they too immediately started sharing the Good News! And those fear-filled Disciples, the ones hiding out in the Upper Room, they also had a personal encounter with the Risen Lord, later that same night in fact! And then again, a week later, so that the Doubter, Thomas, might experience the same thing!

In fact, in the very next chapter of John, we learn that the Risen Lord appeared at the Sea of Tiberius and had breakfast on the shore with some of the Believers! And He appeared again and again and again, Luke tells us in Acts, over a forty-day period of time, "offering many convincing proofs that He was alive!"

"He appeared to over five hundred believers at the same time," Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "many of whom are still around to validate that claim!" And on the road to Damascus, the Risen Lord appeared to Paul himself, who then went from being a persecutor of Christians, to one of the most powerful witnesses of all time! There is a pattern here, isn't there, a definite theme! It has to do with hanging around and seeing Jesus for yourself!

That reminds me. Remember when God was sending Moses to free the people from bondage in Egypt, and Moses asked Him, “who should I say sent me? What’s your name?” God answered him, “Tell them I AM”! Notice God doesn’t say, “I WAS”! This isn’t some kind of history lesson, or a remembrance of yesterday. And He doesn’t say “I WILL BE”, as if it is only about the future. He says, “I AM”! Present tense!

I AM, right here with you, right now. And I will be, always, even to the end of the age! It’s the same thing Jesus said as well, when He was asked by the Sanhedrin if He is the Messiah! “I AM”, He said! That’s what changed! Sticking around long enough to experience the Presence of the Risen Lord!

Whatever your expectations might be, each personal encounter with our Risen Lord will move you that much closer to the Truth, that much deeper in your Faith! Which, when you think about it, may be why we coming back home! Why we keep coming back to Church! Why we continue to show up on Easter Morning! We need intentional times of quiet minds, and open hearts, of just being still, in order to get a glimpse of the Risen Lord! You see the proof, apparently, is in the Presence! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We praise you Lord, as our God, as our loving Father, and as the Creator of all that is, and all that ever will be! We glorify your Holy Name! We honor you with humble hearts Lord, and thank you for loving so very much! Thank you, Father, for this glorious Easter Morning! Thank you for bringing us home, here together, to Worship you, and to learn of your will for our lives. And thank you Lord, even more, for that first Easter Morning, when our Lord and Savior burst forth from the grave! Thank you, dear God, for conquering death, and for creating a way for our sins to be repaid! And thank you most of all, for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ!

Father, we acknowledge that we are sinners. We know we've failed you, and often fall short of your design for our lives. So, with this prayer, and with our silent prayers just now, we lay each of our burdens down before your Altar of Grace. We place our sins, our brokenness, and our failures before you, confident of your forgiveness, knowing that the Blood of Jesus, the Risen Christ, covers them all. And we thank you Lord, for this great gift of sacrificial love that you paid on our behalf!

Father, you have heard our silent prayers, both our joys and our concerns. You have searched our minds and touched the longing places within our hearts. So please, out of the bounty of your love, grant to us now the Blessings that we need. And please Father, smile upon our loved ones as well. We lift up before you.....Please shower your Grace on these precious folks. Please grant health and healing to their bodies, and peace upon their minds. And please, grant them the gifts that they need most right now, especially your Presence. We ask these things in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us saying...