

1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26 (p. 933)

APRIL 17, 2022

JOHN 20:1-18 (p. 880)

BLAINE

EASTER

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Like Mary Lord, we have come to honor you. She brought spices, and we bring praise. She came in sorrow. We come in celebration. Mary approached the Tomb with a heavy heart. We come with open ones—although, sometimes they are heavy as well. Yet even in our tears, Lord, we look into the Empty Tomb and long to hear your Voice calling our name. May that happen today, on this Glorious Easter Morning! Amen.

“WHY ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

Do you remember when everyone had Bumper Stickers on their cars? You don't really see that much anymore. Maybe it's the plastic bumpers? Or maybe it's an attempt to maintain the resale value of the car? Oh, you still see some, usually on windows though. Those little vinyl people representing all the members of the family, including the cats and dogs. Or “My child is an Honor Student at Such and Such High School”! But you don't see many, do you? And that's too bad!

I think you can tell a lot about the driver of a car with Bumper Stickers. What's important, and what's not. What they believe, their values and such. Although, I have seen several “Fish Symbols” on cars with drivers who were less-than-courteous! So, what's your favorite? Think back to the Bumper Sticker Glory Days. Is there one that really speaks to you?

Mine has always been; “Jesus”! Big surprise, right? Which, by-the-way, is usually the correct answer in a Children’s Moment. “Jesus”! That reminds me of my second favorite, “Jesus is the Answer”! But here is the thing; “What’s the question?” Have you ever thought about that?

In the early, pre-dawn hours, Jesus asks Mary, “Why are you crying?” But that’s followed by, “Who is it that you are looking for?” And that’s actually the question, isn’t it, our question, especially today! Who is it that you are looking for?

I mean its Easter, right, the single biggest day of the Christian year! Today is bigger than Christmas and Advent and Epiphany and Pentecost, all rolled into one! More people are in Church on Easter than on any other given Sunday, across the globe! Theologically, this is it! Game Day! But have you ever wondered why? I mean, what’s the point? Why do people Worship Jesus? Why are you here? Who is it that you are looking for? We have Crucifixion, Resurrection, and an Empty Tomb! But what does Easter really mean?

The Apostle Paul, in our first reading today, says it’s serious. In his letter to the Church in Corinth he writes, “If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then all of this is nonsense! Our preaching is futile, and so is your Faith! If our hope is only for this life, then we, of all people, should be most pitied!” In other words, it’s either serious, eternally serious, or just a waste of time! So, what does Easter mean? More importantly, what does it mean to you? Who is that you are looking for?

There are all kinds of opinions on that question, aren't there. Or on parts of that question. Maybe you've heard some? Maybe you have some of your own? Historians all agree that a man named Jesus lived in the First Century, in the Middle East. That He was born in Nazareth, and lived in Galilee. That He taught and preached throughout Israel, reaching out to the marginalized and healing the sick! They all acknowledge that He was Crucified by the Romans, even, who ruled the entire known world!

So, for some, Jesus was a good example. A Humanitarian. A great "Moral and Ethical Teacher". For others though, He is "God Incarnate", like it says in Scripture, "The Word that Became Flesh"! And there are those, of course, who like Karl Marx, think that all Religions, all manifestations of Faith, are just an "Opiate for The Masses". So, where are you? Better yet, where should you be?

The goal is the Truth, right, not simply opinions. So, let's explore. Engage your mind. You want discernment and understanding. But engage your heart as well. You want to hear what God is saying, particularly to you. Just step into the sandals of those early Easter witnesses for a moment, and see things from their perspective. And maybe discover who you're looking for.

Why did Mary go to the Garden Tomb early on Easter morning? Or again, why are we here? Was it to simply fulfill a religious duty, or a social obligation? Was it tradition, maybe, just sort of going through the motions? Was her presence "expected" by others, like family? She was just doing what she was supposed to do? Or was it more?

Do you think she was there to honor Jesus' life? You know, like you would at a Funeral. Was she there to show respect to an awesome Teacher and Rabbi, a true Man of Faith, to honor a spectacular three-year ministry? I mean, He healed the sick, and comforted those in distress. That's all part of the historical record. He reached out to the marginalized, and even hung-out with sinners. Jesus taught about the things of God, in powerful ways, and in ways that made them come alive! He was impressive! Even Atheists agree with that!

He stood toe-to-toe with the Political Elite, calling them out on the issues of His day. You've got to respect that. He questioned the self-righteous Religious Authorities as well, defending True Faith! He turned the tables of the money changers up on end for heaven's sake, declaring to the Capitalists that the House of God is a place of prayer, not a marketplace for commerce! I know places where that needs to happen today!

So, do you think Mary was there to simply demonstrate respect? To make sure that this honest, and brilliant Religious Reformer, who called for Authentic Worship, received a proper burial? Maybe? But I don't think it's only that! That doesn't follow logically!

Jesus can't just be "a Good Man". I mean, He stated, clearly, on numerous occasions, that He is "The Son of God", that He "was sent by God", that "if you have seen Him, you have seen the Father", and that "no one comes to the Father except through Him"! So, as C. S. Lewis, an Oxford Literary Scholar so eloquently puts it in his book *Mere Christianity*, Jesus can't just be a good man! He is either a Lunatic, a Liar, or Lord!

Lewis writes, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying that really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil from Hell.”

“You must make your choice,” Lewis continues, “either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman, or something worse! You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.”

That’s a bit direct, isn’t it? But it’s also true. Jesus can’t just be a Great Humanitarian or Good Example. So, that’s not who we are looking for. And He can’t be just a Religious Reformer either! He actually calls for more than that! In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not Prophecy in your Name and in your Name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

These so-called followers called Him Lord, right! But that isn't enough! And they did great things, miracles and prophesy, in His Name even! But that isn't enough either! Being "good", even doing "good", isn't good enough! These guys failed to have a personal relationship with Him, right, to know Him! Which prevented them from entering the Kingdom of Heaven! It is serious, isn't it? So, back to our text. And back to our question. Why are you here? Who is it that you are looking for?

Are you like Mary, maybe, broken-hearted, crying outside of an Empty Tomb? Are you filled with grief, or loss? Is that why you are here? Have you come to the Empty Tomb this morning like Peter, in order to see for yourself? And will you then, like him, walk away "perplexed and confused", maybe shaking your head in disbelief? Or are you more like John-Mark, the "other Disciple", who with just a glance inside the Empty Tomb, your heart opens to the Truth? You too understand what "all this means"! Or are you here, in this still, quiet place, eager to speak with your Resurrected Lord?

For those of you who have been at this for a while, think back to your first peak into the Empty Tomb. How did you respond? Did you immediately run back down the hill, joyfully proclaiming the Good News to everyone you encountered? Or did you, like many Disciples, go back home and cower in fear? Some were unsure you know, worried about what others might think! They had no idea what to do! That very night, even after hearing about the Resurrection from close friends, most were hiding away in the Upper Room! Some were even still there a week later! If that's where you are, that's okay! You are in good company! There is a lot to consider here!

The key is to be honest with yourself. What is it that you see? What is it that you hear? Where do you stand when it comes to the Empty Tomb? What do you notice when you look inside?

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene walked through the streets of Jerusalem, and out through a gate in the city wall. She walked past a rock outcropping called Golgotha in Aramaic, the “Place of the Skull”. She passed a group of three Crosses, all stained with blood from nails driven through hands and feet. And on the center one, blood from a spear thrust into the man’s side. She eventually arrived alone at the Garden Tomb, only to discover that the two-ton stone covering the entrance has been removed.

Mary then goes running to find Simon Peter and John-Mark. She must have been scared, don’t you think, confused, bewildered! “They have taken my Lord,” she thought “and I don’t know where they have put Him! I want to anoint His body for burial, but the stone has been rolled away, the one sealed by the Roman Governor himself, the one guarded by an entire contingent of Roman soldiers! How in the world can this be?”

She saw Jesus Crucified with her own eyes! She watched as the Roman soldier pierced His side, and listened as the authorities proclaimed that He was dead! She stood at the foot of the Cross weeping as they took His body down, and continued to cry as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Him in burial linen and laid Him in the Tomb!

Mary, along with the other Disciples, witnessed that great stone rolled into place! She saw the seal placed upon it, and then waited patiently till after the Sabbath, so that she could anoint His body in the proper way! It was over as far as Mary was concerned! Jesus was gone! It's no wonder she came running to the others for help!

She had to be scared, don't you think! I would have been! And the other Disciples must have been in a swirl of emotions themselves! I mean most of them had given up their careers, their livelihood, to join in this ministry! But now their leader was dead! Granted, they've experienced some pretty amazing things; multitudes fed with a couple of fish and few loaves of bread, storms calmed with just a word! They have witnessed demons cast out of people, blind folks given sight, lame people enabled to walk, and jump and shout!

And when Jesus was Crucified, the sun darkened for three hours! The earth shook with a massive quake, and rocks split apart! The Curtain in the Temple, the wall separating God's dwelling place from the rest of the world, was torn in two, from top to bottom! Scripture witnesses to all of these events! But so do First Century, non-Christian Historians like Josephus! This had to have been a whirlwind for all of them! Three years of "truly amazing" things, followed by a climatic, devastating conclusion! The Romans, the greatest army the world has ever known, has crushed their hopes and shattered their dreams! Their future is gone! Jesus has been Crucified and buried, beaten and belittled! How would you feel if you were among them?

I suspect some were disappointed, don't you? Some might be sad, or even depressed. Each of them had their own expectations for how the Kingdom of God would unfold! They all had envisioned what it would be like, or what they wanted it to be like, or what they had heard someone else say it would be like! But this was different, really different! Everything had suddenly changed!

I imagine some of the Disciples were frustrated, or angry even! I know I'd be! Anger is a lot easier to deal with than hurt or disappointment. Some were probably ready to throw in the towel and walk away from this entire religion thing! In fact, John tells us that two of them were already heading out of town on the afternoon of that first Easter, to the nearby village of Emmaus! And the others, by that time, were all hiding out in that Upper Room locked away in fear! The Crucifixion brought an entire spectrum of emotions! It often does! And hearing about the Empty Tomb had just amplified these!

So, what's your Easter Experience? Can you see yourself in the text? Many would-be Disciples, still today, hear things or see things that cause confusion! Some get frustrated and want to throw in the towel! When a leader, for instance, or another Disciple, or the Church as a whole lets you down, it's easier to just pack up and head out of town, isn't it! It's easier to just stay at home, too. To hide in your room, particularly when you don't understand what's happening, or if you are worried what others will think. And if you happen to come to the place where you last saw Jesus, only to find what appears to be an Empty Tomb, tears will most likely come to your eyes!

Let's be honest. Some people come to see Jesus, but only notice an Empty Tomb. Others just see an angry mob. We've all had our Friday nights of darkness, when it looked as if all was lost; a terminal illness, the loss of a loved one, the end of what we thought was a promising career, or ministry. We've all trusted in something, or someone, who then let us down. We have all been devastated at some point in our lives, experienced an overwhelming sense of grief, right?

And we've all known times when it was difficult to just put one foot in front of the other, let alone continue on the Journey in Faith! Triumph wasn't even an option! Survival was all that mattered! So, do you think that's how Mary felt as she stood outside of the Empty Tomb in that pre-dawn light, crying?

So, what changed for her? How did Mary, weeping outside of the Empty Tomb, go from the depths of despair to overwhelmingly excited? So much so, that she had to run and tell the others the Good News!

When John-Mark looked into the Empty Tomb, he saw the burial cloth folded up by itself, the linen and such, and immediately believed! But Peter, "Still didn't understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead", so he "went back to his home". Luke says, in his Gospel, that Peter went away "wondering to himself what had happened"!

Mary, however, even though she is clearly distraught, lingers in the Garden for a while. She stood outside the Tomb crying. She even bent down and looked inside. She saw two angels dressed in white seated where Jesus had been. They also asked her why she was crying. But still, Mary didn't get it! All of that wasn't enough! "They've taken my Lord away," she answered, "and I don't know where they have put Him"!

Maybe you've made that cry at one point or another in your life. "The Lord is gone! And I don't know where to find Him!" If so, notice that even catching a glimpse of Jesus didn't do it for Mary! She lingered and looked! She asked and listened! She even saw Him standing there! But it was only when Jesus called her by name, that she was able to believe! If that's you today, take heart! Peter and the rest of the Disciples only came out of that locked room to share the Good News, after Jesus appeared to them as well, and spoke to them. Those two Disciples heading out to the town of Emmaus only recognized the Risen Lord when He spoke to them while breaking bread. It was only then, that they turned around and headed back to Jerusalem and started spreading the Good News.

It was back in that Upper Room, a week later in fact, that doubting Thomas was spoken to by Jesus. And out on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius that the Risen Jesus had breakfast with seven more Disciples, talking about all the things to come! Jesus spoke to many people face-to-face, we are told in Acts, over a period of forty days, before Ascending into Heaven, right before their eyes! And you know, He has spoken to many people since! Some just recently!

So, maybe listen for yourself. Then listen to yourself. I mean, He said He conquered Death! And He has promised Eternal Life to those who believe! So, open your eyes, and open your heart! Revelation often comes when Jesus speaks your name, and you turn and answer. So, linger for a while, and listen, like Mary. Listen with your heart. Listen for that still, small voice speaking to you. And by all means, when you hear it, respond! Because Christ the Lord has Risen Indeed! And He really wants you to know that! 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 will ever be. We glorify your Holy Name. We honor you with humble hearts. And we thank you Lord, for loving us as much as you do.

Thank you, Father, for this glorious Easter Morning! Thank you for bringing us 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 Savior burst forth from the grave. Thank you, Lord, for conquering death and for creating a way for our sins to be repaid! Thank you, Lord, for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ.

Father, we acknowledge our sins right now. We know that we have failed, and fallen short of your design for our lives. So, with this prayer, Lord, and with our silent prayers as well, we lay each of these burdens down on your Altar of Grace, confident of your forgiveness. We place our sins, our rebellion, our brokenness, and our failures, before you just now. And we do this because we realize that the Blood of Jesus, the Risen Christ, covers them all, and covers us, making us whole and Holy in your sight. Thank you, Lord, for the price you so willingly paid for all of us!

Father, you have heard our silent prayers, both our joys and our concerns. You have searched our minds and touched the longing, lonely places within our hearts. Please grant us now, Blessings out of the Bounty of your Love. And please, Bless our loved ones as well. We lift up Please shower your grace upon these precious folks. Please grant health and healing on their bodies, and peace upon their minds. Please bless them, and us, with the gifts that we need most, especially your Presence! We ask this in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, and pray as He taught us saying, Our Father...