

Year A Easter Day
John 20:1-18

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

Alleluia, the Lord is risen!

This morning Mary Magdalen runs and tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord! But at first she didn't even recognize him. How could that be? Have you wondered why she thought he was the gardener? You'd think she'd recognize her beloved teacher, and her Lord. But remember, Jesus is supposed to be dead. In Jesus's time, people didn't expect anyone to rise from the dead any more than we do now.

Mary Magdalene was one of the people present at Jesus's crucifixion. She was at the foot of the cross, and watched his agony, and she saw him die. Mary is under no illusions about the fact that, not only has Jesus really died, but that he was embalmed with myrrh and aloe, wrapped in linen burial cloths, put in a tomb, and that a heavy stone was rolled in front of it. She expects to find the stone covering the tomb's opening, as it should be.

When she arrives, and finds the stone rolled away, she is so shocked that she doesn't even look inside to see if Jesus's body is still there. Knowing that Jesus had so many powerful enemies, she jumps to the conclusion that someone has come and stolen the body away. In a panic, she runs to tell the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Equally shocked at this idea, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved race each other to the tomb, to find that Mary is right in at least one particular: the *body* of Jesus is gone.

The two men go back home, very likely horrified and wondering what to do, but Mary stays, weeping by the empty tomb. Then finally, she brings herself to look inside it, only to find that it's not empty at all. There are "two angels in white" sitting where Jesus's body had been. Let's sit with that for a moment. Two angels. In white. We seldom hear about angels in the New Testament, and when we do, it's for some momentous

announcement—because the word angel literally means “messenger.” The only time angels appear in the new testament are at the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to Jesus; Joseph’s reassurance that Mary’s baby is from the Holy Spirit; Zechariah’s announcement of the coming of John the Baptist; and the announcement to the shepherds of Jesus’s birth. And now. This is THE momentous announcement: that Jesus has been raised from the dead. You can imagine how amazed Mary is. Yes, she has been traveling with Jesus, and witnessing all of these healings and exorcisms, and other miracles, but Jesus was a human being. These are creatures from heaven. You might remember that the first thing angels usually say is “do not be afraid.” So she probably is afraid of these two angels.

But instead of telling her not to be afraid, or of giving her any message, they ask Mary why she is weeping, which she is anxious to tell them about. And they’re probably just getting ready to comfort her, and deliver their message—but then the angels are upstaged by Jesus, himself. The Lord himself will deliver this resurrection message himself, no angels needed.

By the time Mary sees Jesus, she is very likely just trying to hold it together. She’s been through a lot. Mary has been traumatized by witnessing Jesus’s brutal murder, she’s wracked with grief, she’s convinced that her Lord’s body has been stolen, and the disciples have gone off and left her alone—with two angels sitting in Jesus’s tomb. With all this on her mind, it’s not surprising that she wouldn’t immediately recognize Jesus. After all, he’s supposed to be dead.

But when he calls her by name, she recognizes him. He is the good shepherd, remember. He knows his sheep by name, and his sheep know his voice. When he lovingly says, “Mary,” she says “Rabbouni!” in joyful recognition.

How often have we not recognized someone? Maybe they’re out of their usual context. Maybe they have a new haircut or color. Maybe it’s sunglasses and a hat. Maybe it’s been years since you’ve seen them, and

they have changed a lot. When I was teaching aquaerobics as a young woman, I often didn't recognize my class participants when I saw them with clothes on, instead of a bathing suit. It's not so uncommon to fail to recognize someone.

But how often do we fail to recognize Jesus? I think, even more than Mary Magdalene, we fail to recognize Jesus when we see him in his post-resurrection form. Because now he has ascended to his Father, and has left his Holy Spirit behind for us. Now this Spirit walks and talks and acts in all of us. And we often are not expecting that. Like Mary, we don't expect to see Jesus at all. But he is risen, my friends. He is risen, and we are now the face of Christ to one another. The crucifixion was not the end, but the beginning of new life, and we live that life together in Jesus. Mary excitedly tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" So have all of you. And you will again. Watch for him.

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen!

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