**April 5, 2015 – Easter Day**

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Happy Easter!

I think that John’s unique version of the empty tomb is by far the most dramatic, although this might be because I wrote the book to a play called *Mary – The Musical*, which is about Mary Magdalene. But John goes into such loving detail about setting the scene and the emotional roller coaster the principal characters are on that you can’t help but enter into it.

Like the synoptic accounts, the scene begins in the early morning, but unlike the other three, John’s version has Mary Magdalene coming alone to the tomb in the pre-dawn darkness. In Mark and Luke, the women brought spices to properly prepare Jesus’ body for burial, but in John, Mary doesn’t seem to have a specific purpose for being there. Perhaps she just wanted to be near Jesus, even though he was dead.

Maybe she couldn’t stand being around the rest of the disciples in their grief and sought a quiet place to be alone with her feelings. Maybe she just needed air and her wanderings brought her to the garden with the tomb in it.

So imagine her surprise and dismay when she finds the stone which had covered the opening to the tomb rolled back. Once again, we don’t know why she just turned on her heels and ran back to town instead of investigating further. Maybe she was afraid of grave robbers who might still be there. Or maybe she wanted to make sure none of the disciples had taken Jesus’ body away for some reason.

And then, although she hadn’t actually looked in the tomb, she told Peter and one other disciple that someone had taken Jesus’ body away. Maybe she thought they wouldn’t take her seriously if she merely said the stone was rolled away. All we know is that her mission to them was urgent enough to run the distance between the garden and where the disciples were, and they responded just as urgently, setting off in return also at a run.

Once again, John puts in those little human touches that make him so unique a writer. The other disciple, the “one that Jesus loved,” but who is never named in the Gospel, which leads many scholars to think it was John himself, and Peter take off together, but soon the other disciple passes Peter by. For some reason, probably because of the person we cast as Peter in our staged reading of *Mary* in New York, I always think of Peter as kind of a big guy, built for endurance, not speed. But then, in spite of winning the race, the other disciple stops and looks in the tomb but doesn’t go in, letting Peter catch up with him and go in first.

The little details, like the fact that Peter notices the weird arrangement of the burial cloths, make this story seem almost like an eye-witness account. The two of them stand there awhile scratching their heads in puzzlement, because they believe that something strange had happened there and that Jesus was certainly gone, but they didn’t understand what it meant yet. Then they head off home again, leaving Mary at the tomb alone.

She finally gets up the nerve to look in the tomb herself, although she can hardly see for her tears. Unlike what Peter and maybe John had seen, the tomb wasn’t entirely empty. She sees two angels dressed in white, and when they ask her why she is weeping, she answers that someone has taken her Lord away and she doesn’t know where he is. At this point she is so firmly rooted on earth and the reality of grief and death, that she doesn’t put two and two together to even question why there would be angels in Jesus’ tomb instead of him.

Which brings us to the most dramatic part of our scene. When she turns around, there is Jesus himself, standing right in front of her. And she doesn’t recognize him! Believe me, this caused no end of grief to my fellow playwright and me, because we couldn’t figure out how to stage this to be believable. That’s the difference between real life, or even a play, and this story. There certainly is belief here, but it isn’t the kind of belief that requires physical proof or even human logic.

Jesus also asks her why she is weeping, and again, she is too deep in her sorrow to even answer clearly. She supposes him to be the gardener and again asks him if he knows where they’ve taken Jesus’ body, since of course she still assumes him to be dead. Jesus then merely says her name, and she not only knows who he is, but she doesn’t even question it but immediately calls him Teacher and quite naturally goes to cling to him.

Once again, in trying to hold on to him, she is grounded to the earthly reality of Jesus, which is only natural, given the circumstances. But he holds her off saying he has one last thing to do – to ascend to his father – to complete his journey on earth. And he sends her off, his apostle to the apostles, to tell the others what she has seen.

This version sets the story of Jesus’ resurrection in such a wonderfully human light. There is fear and urgency and running back and forth. There are tears of grief and sorrow for the death of a friend, and bewilderment over the fact that things aren’t as they should be at his burial place. There is mistaken identity, and joy over the return of one who was thought to be gone forever.

But amid all these very human emotions and reactions, there is faith. And through faith, there is hope. In fact, the most hopeful phrase in this passage is Jesus’ last words to Mary, “…Go to my brothers and say to them, `I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

I am ascending to my Father and YOUR Father, to my God and YOUR God. Those are amazing words. Once Jesus completes his journey on earth by having died, been resurrected, and finally ascending back to heaven, he completes his work of reconciling all of humanity to God. Now, no longer are we separated from God by our sin and disobedience, but we are adopted into his family as co-heirs with Jesus. We are now true children of God, through the means of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

This is huge!

Today we are celebrating Jesus’ resurrection. But it’s also more than that. We’re celebrating the whole thing – as Rite I puts it, “his blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension.” We are celebrating, also as Rite I puts it, “being heirs, through hope, of [his] everlasting kingdom.”

But with this celebration also comes responsibility. Our responsibility is to keep that hope alive in a world where hope seems in short supply. Mary was tasked with telling the other disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” That’s our task as well. We are Easter people, and we are charged with bringing the good news of Jesus to the rest of the world.

It’s not an easy task. It might involve talking to people who don’t want to particularly hear what we have to say. It might involve reaching out to the poor and marginalized in our community because that’s what Jesus tells us to do. But, like Mary, we are called to be fearless in proclaiming the Gospel.

And just like Mary couldn’t hold on to Jesus in that Garden, we can’t hold Jesus here in our building. We need to bring him outside with us. It’ll be hard work sometimes, and thankless, but it’s so worth it. And I have all the hope offered by Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and his promise to us that we are his brothers and sisters, that we here at Grace can truly be his apostles to the world!

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!