

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: April 9, 2023, Easter Sunday, Yr. A

Text: John 20:1-18

Title: Who Are You Looking For? (From Sanctified Art)

Focus: Expectations and Surprises: Mary Magdalene expected certain things when she came to the tomb and was also surprised. We, too, even though we may have heard the story, have expectations and are also surprised.

Gospel Reading: John 20:1-18

The Resurrection of Jesus

²⁰Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²¹So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ²²Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ²³The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ²⁴He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ²⁵Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ²⁶and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ²⁷Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ²⁸for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ²⁹Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

³⁰But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^{*} into the tomb; ³¹and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ³²They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ³³When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ³⁴Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ³⁵Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^{*} 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ³⁶Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ³⁷³⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Expected and Unexpected

Last Sunday on Palm Sunday (also called Palm Passion Sunday), Good Shepherd resumed what has been a congregational tradition since at least the 1970s of walking from church down Arlington Ave. to Wingfield Park to recall Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem in the week before his death.



This year we read the scripture from Matthew which describes how Jesus came into the city.

- We carried strips of palm fronds and banners with hand-crafted paintings of palm fronds. We read how the people who welcomed Jesus cut palm branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
- We carried a "Hosanna" banner and at the beginning the service repeated, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Initially, "Hosanna" was a call for help; it meant "Help us, save us!" and it also came to be a way of offering praise.
- We read that Jesus came into the city riding on a donkey and we acted out the scene, with kids and adults raising hands and volunteering to be disciples, Jesus, and even the donkey with her baby foal next to her.

As I said, this is a tradition of Good Shepherd dating to the 1970s and of course has been enacted in other places for generations before then. But just because it's a tradition in particular places and over a long period of time doesn't mean it's familiar to everyone.

As we were on our way, a girl from our group, about 8 years old, walking near me asked me, **"So why are we walking to the park?"** Her question created what educators call "A teachable moment." "Why?" Is such a great question. Thank you for asking it.

Her question kind of reoriented me. It reminded me to be as explicit and clear as possible about why we're doing this or what it means. The question prompted me to reset my expectations. It caused me to realize that as familiar as this story or this tradition may be for some, she had no expectations; she was just experiencing this in the moment as it was happening.

These reflections are all helpful to me as I think about the whole Easter story and about what we expect and how we might be surprised. For instance. . .

- What does Mary expect? And by what is she surprised?

- Most of us have heard this story before. We think we know certain things and we have expectations, too, but are we still open to surprises? Can we hear the story in a fresh way?
- On the walk to the park, a child's question reset my expectations or helped me recognize that a long-standing tradition for many was brand new for her. In the Easter story which John tells, are there questions to ask or details to pay attention to which would show us something we've never seen before?
- What does a story full of surprises say about God? God seems to like surprises. God seems to confound expectations. God seems to choose unlikely people to convey important things. If we recognize that God likes surprises and chooses unlikely people, how might that affect where we look for God? How might it affect in whom we look for God at work?

I'm grateful for that question "Why?" because it helped me to reorient myself to the whole setting.

Mary Magdalene as the Unexpected or Surprising Person. Mary is faithful.

So, what's surprising in this story, even if we've heard it before? What might have been overlooked before?

One distinction in the Gospel of John is the role of Mary Magdalene. In the story of Jesus' death in the preceding chapter, John 19, John describes the women who are there, watching at a distance. This Mary, Mary Magdalene, is among them.

- Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (John 19:25).

Think about that for a moment: Much of our attention in the arc of this on-going story—aside from being focused on Jesus--has been on the 12 disciples. Jesus has spoken of **Judas** as the one who will betray him. **Peter** makes his bold prediction that even if all the others desert Jesus, he will stay by him (Matthew 26:35, John 18:37). Later, of course, just as Jesus has said, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times.

Mary Magdalene and these other women (different women are named in different gospels), remain in the background. Here and there their actions are noted, but they typically aren't the focal point.¹ But John describes how Mary and other women keep vigil at the cross. In fact, all 4 gospels describe how the women keep watch while the men scatter in fear. (Just as Jesus has predicted (John 16:32)). The women stand firm.

¹ There are some exceptions, like Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus with costly nard in John 12:1-8.

When our attention has been focused on the 12 disciples, it may be unexpected to see the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene and these other women.

After Jesus' death, John describes how Joseph of Arimathea asks for Jesus' body, wraps it with spices in a cloth (with help from Nicodemus), and places it in a freshly-hewn tomb (John 19:38-42).

That brings us to today's reading. The gospel writers vary a bit in their description. John describes how Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. Let's slow down a bit as we hear the story. What was it like for Mary, as she was experiencing it in the moment?

- It was early when Mary came to the tomb; it was still dark.
- What was she expecting? Well, what are the clues in the story?
 - What *would* a person expect at a gravesite or tomb? From watching before, she knew where Jesus' body was placed and that a stone was across the entrance. She was expecting the place to be undisturbed with a body inside.
 - She instead encounters another surprise: The stone is rolled away; it had been removed from the tomb (v. 1).
 - She doesn't do anything else to investigate; she doesn't go into the tomb or look around. She's already concluded that there is only one explanation: **"They've taken the Lord and we do not know where they have laid him"** (v. 2). That's what she says to Peter and the other disciple when she runs to tell them.
 - What has happened? What she figures is that someone has robbed the grave; they've taken the body. No other explanation comes to mind; this is what she has concluded.
- So, she runs to Peter and the other disciple and then they come running to check it out—that part makes sense. That might be what you expect. As the story is told, the other disciple gets there first, looks inside the tomb and sees the linen cloth, but does not go in.
 - Peter gets there and goes in and sees the cloth which was on the body and another which was on Jesus' head.
 - Then the other disciple goes in "and saw and believed" (v. 8).

The next part is funny—odd funny--to me: The text says that "He saw and believed, though they did not yet understand the scripture" that [Jesus] must rise from the dead (v. 9), but then they went home.

Why did they go home? The empty tomb had to be the biggest surprise, the craziest, most unbelievable, thing that happened—that anyone could even *imagine* happening--and *they go home?! They don't stick around or check it out some more or*

wait to see what happens next or run and tell the others? How do they just go home? This disciple “saw and believed,” but they went home.

No explanation is given for why they went home; It’s just matter-of-fact description: This is what they did.

Mary is Surprised, too, but stays. . .

Mary is surprised, too, and confused. But she doesn’t “go home.” She concludes that the body has been taken. Peter and the other disciple are also confused. And yet Mary in her confusion has been able to go and tell others. Even in her confusion, Mary is able to bear witness to the empty tomb, while the men remain silent. They return home.

Mary is Surprised by Jesus, who Commissions her to “Go and Tell.”

The story shifts to a second scene with Mary returning to the tomb. As contrasted with before, this time she looks into the tomb. She sees the two angels there and they ask her why she is weeping (v. 13).

The most poignant moment in this scene is the direct interaction between the risen Jesus and Mary. She turns away from the angels in the tomb and back toward the garden. She sees Jesus. We as readers know that it is he, while she supposed him to be the gardener. He asks her the same question that the angels did, “Why are you weeping?” and then “For whom are you looking?” (20:15).

These are the first questions asked by the risen Jesus. “**Who are you looking for?**” mirrors the question Jesus first asked in his public ministry as described in John’s gospel. Disciples of John the Baptist approached Jesus and he asked them, “**What are you looking for?**” (John 1:38). When they reply, he invites them to follow him by saying, “Come and see” (John 1:39). It is a call to discipleship, to follow Jesus.

The repetition of the same question here, slightly modified, “What are you looking for?” and “Who are you looking for?” by the risen Jesus connects Mary to the first disciples of Jesus.

And yet she still does not recognize him; she still figures that he is the gardener. It is when he calls her by name, “Mary,” (v. 16) that she recognizes him. She hears her name in his voice and she recognizes him.

That echoes another portion of John’s gospel when Jesus describes himself as **the Good Shepherd** who calls his own by name and whose sheep hear and know his voice. (John 10).

With this personal connection comes Mary’s recognition. Whereas before, the only explanation for the empty tomb was that the body was stolen, she now understands. The empty tomb is no longer a reminder of death, but now it is a sign of the power of new life.

Jesus commissions her to go and tell the others (v. 17) and she went and tells them “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18) and tells them what Jesus has said.

She is the first Easter witness. She is a witness in two ways or in two senses or meanings of the word:

- She is a witness as the one who has **seen the risen Jesus** and
- She is a witness in being **the first to tell others what she has seen**.

Closing: What's Surprising?

What was surprising in this story that you likely have heard before?

- We may be surprised by **Mary Magdalene**: In John's story she moves from the background to the foreground. While our attention has been on the 12 disciples, Mary displays a faithfulness and steadfastness that we may have overlooked before.
- We may be surprised that those who were with Jesus the most, **the 12 disciples**, and heard him describe how "on the third day he would rise again" were so confounded by what they saw, that even when they "saw and believed" that they went home.
- We may be surprised that **Mary was the first witness** to the empty tomb. She was a witness in both senses of the word:
 - A witness in that she saw and observed the empty tomb and
 - A witness that she went and told others.
- We may be surprised that **Jesus responds to Mary as a full disciple** or follower.
 - He calls her by name.
 - The way that he asks her, "Who are you looking for?" is like his call to discipleship at the beginning of John when he asks, "What are you looking for?" and
 - He specifically commissions her, telling her, "Go and tell the others. . . ." (John 20:17) and
 - she went and announced to them, "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18).

God Likes Surprises and God Chooses Unlikely People

From the unlikely birth of Jesus to a young woman in a small, insignificant town, to his death on a cross, to an empty tomb, God seems to like surprises. God seems to confound expectations by intentionally choosing unlikely people and surprising us all.

Whether it is attentively listening to a child or recognizing that God delights in choosing unexpected or unlikely people, let us be alert to God's surprises.

Thanks be to God for surprising Good News.