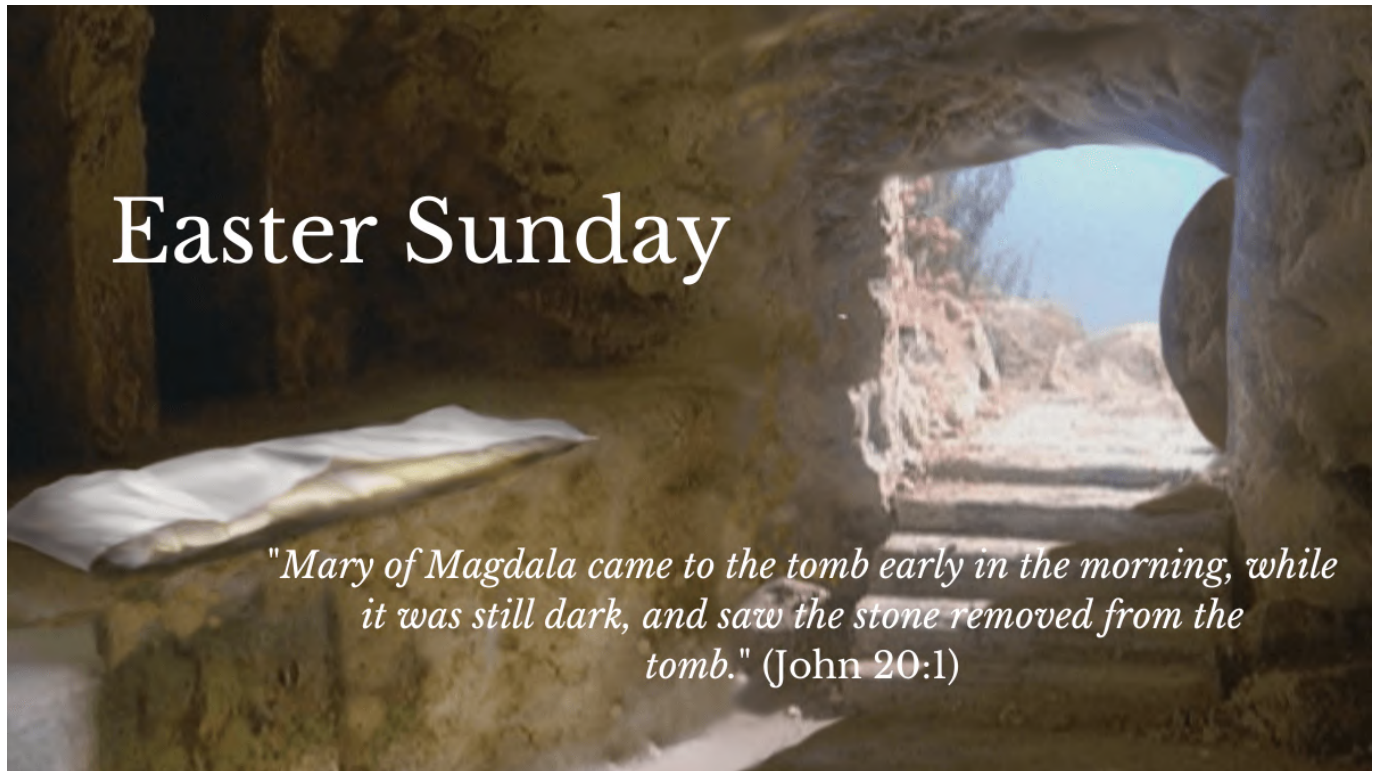


Easter Sunday The Gospel of John



¹ On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." ³ So, Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. ⁴ They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; ⁵ he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. ⁶ When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, ⁷ and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. ⁸ Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead. (John 20:1-9)

The Accounts of Easter Morning

While the details within and among the gospels vary, all record that Jesus' body, after his death on the cross, was laid in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea. All four gospels then come to their crowning point in the account of the Resurrection, but each in its own way. They all agree that women came to the tomb:

- "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning" (Matthew 28:1)
- "When the sabbath was over... Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week" (Mark 16:1-2)
- "But at daybreak on the first day of the week" (Luke 24:1)
- "On the first day of the week...early in the morning, while it was still dark" (John 20:1)

All agree that the Sabbath was complete and it was the first day of the week - Sunday in the Christian reckoning. One might notice that the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all report that the sun was rising in the dawn of this new day, however, John reports that it was still dark. One needs to

remember that John uses “dark” to describe unknowing, unbelief and things similar rather than time of day. In the Johannine gospel “unknowing” is an apt description of Mary Magdalene and the disciples.

As the account move forward small details begin to vary:

- The messenger bring news of the Empty Tomb
 - a young man dressed in a white robe (Mk 16:5),
 - an angel of the Lord (Mt 28:2), and
 - two men in dazzling garments (Lk 24:4)
 - two angels in white (John 20:12, *just outside our Sunday gospel*)
- The ones receiving the message
 - Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome (Mk)
 - Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Mt)
 - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James - and others (Lk)
 - Mary Magdalene alone (John) - although in v.2 she says “*we don’t know where they put him*” indicating she was not alone at the discovery. It is not likely that a woman would have ventured outside the city alone before dawn the crowds in Jerusalem for the Passover
- The message
 - *“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”* (Mk 16:6-7)
 - *“Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold, I have told you.”* (Mt 28:5-7)
 - *“Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.”* (Lk 24:5-7)
 - *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* (John 20:13)
- The initial appearance of Jesus to the women is recorded only in Matthew and John. In the Johannine account Jesus says: “*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?*” (v.15) and then “*Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*” (v.17)

The accounts of Luke and John both include the arrival of the Apostle Peter at the tomb, but then each gospels moves ahead to tell of events after the witness of the Empty Tomb.

The Empty Tomb

The oldest tradition contained in the New Testament concerning the resurrection is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (AD 56-57) he cites what is already part of the Christian narrative and Tradition: “*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve*” (1 Cor 15:3-5). The language used makes it clear that this is not original to St. Paul. It is likely the content of the earliest apostolic preaching originating in the Jerusalem church. While Paul does not specifically mention the Empty Tomb, his four-fold sequence of events (died, buried, raised, appeared) - given Jewish burial customs - leave no doubt that the tomb was empty. All of this is to say that the report of the Empty Tomb is historical.

Beyond that it would have been impossible for the disciples to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem had the tomb not been empty. Also the Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body of Jesus presupposes the empty tomb. [cf. Matthew's story of the guard at the tomb (Mt. 27. 62-66; 28. 11-15)]

The Third Day

There have been some scholars that, while accepting the historicity of the Empty Tomb, offer that the third day is a theological interpretation indicating God's salvation, deliverance, and manifestation. In other words, it wasn't really "three days" but early Christians went looking for OT proof texts for the Resurrection. William Lane Craig (*Reasonable Faith: The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus*) offers:

"...there are nearly 30 passages in the LXX that use the phrase *te hemera te trite* to describe events that happened on the third day. On the third day Abraham offered Isaac (Gen. 22. 4; cf. Gen. 34. 25; 40. 20). On the third day Joseph released his brothers from prison (Gen. 42. 18). After three days God made a covenant with his people and gave the law (Ex 19. 11, 16; cf. Lev 8. 18; Num. 7. 24; 19. 12, 19; Judg 19. 8; 20. 30). On the third day David came to Ziklag to fight the Amalekites (I Sam 30. 1) and on the third day thereafter heard the news of Saul and Jonathan's death (2 Sam 1, 2). On the third day the kingdom was divided (I Kings 12. 24; cf. 2 Chron 10. 12). On the third day King Hezekiah went to the House of the Lord after which he was miraculously healed (2 Kings 20. 5, 8). On the third day Esther began her plan to save her people (Esther 5. 1; cf. 2 Mace II. 18). The only passage in the prophets mentioning the third day is Hos 6. 2. Thus, the third day is a theologically determined time at which God acts to bring about the new and the better, a time of life, salvation, and victory. On the third day comes resolution of a difficulty through God's act."

While describing the OT references, Craig notes that such a search presupposes the need for proof texts because there is no testimony of what was observed. While the gospel accounts might vary in details, "on the third day" is not one of the variations, no matter how it is expressed. The reference to "on the first day of the week" points to an early tradition steeped in Jewish thought and counting of days.

Mary's Response to the Empty Tomb

She "*saw the stone removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him.*"

We should not be surprised by Mary's reaction. She has just encountered mystery and events beyond any category with which she has experience. Of the two possible reactions - which is more likely in your experience: (a) remembering Jesus' prediction of the Resurrection in the unsettling shadow of the events of Good Friday or (b) assuming someone has "*taken the Lord from the tomb*" and immediately moving off to tell Peter, the leader of the disciples? I'd suggest that the latter is the very human first reaction. What will be the "second" reaction? We'll see.

The Disciples Response to Mary's Report

Seemingly Peter and another disciple, upon hearing the report, immediately departed to see for themselves. Different commentaries speculate on the reasons: the desire to make sure, to see if there were signs of grave tampering, the rabbinic standard that women are not reliable witnesses, and list goes on. It does not need to be complicated, they were on the first step of discovery and were leaders of the community of disciples. There would be questions.

³ So, Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. ⁴ They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; ⁵ he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. ⁶ When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, ⁷ and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. ⁸ Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead. (John 20:3-9)

There are lengthy passages asking “how is it that the other disciples ran faster?” Take your pick of the speculative answers: he was younger, faster, knew a short cut, Peter was super slow, the other disciple loved the Lord more, Peter was still weighed down by his denial of Jesus, etc. Whatever the reason, they arrive at the tomb.

Slow might he be, but upon arrival Peter immediately enters the tomb. I am sure the disciples wondered about the burial cloths, their location, and that they seem neatly rolled up, but the important question is after seeing these things, what next? The other disciple “*saw and believed.*”

Leon Morris [*The Gospel according to John*, 736-37] notes that neither verb has an object. “We may fairly conjecture that the object of the first is the grave clothes. These are at the moment, the center of attention. There is no real uncertainty here. But what did he believe? That Jesus rose is our natural answer, but immediately John goes on to say that they did not yet know the Scripture that Jesus must rise. He may mean that, on the basis of the evidence before his eyes, the Beloved Disciple believed that a resurrection had taken place, even despite his ignorance at this time of the significance of the Scripture bearing on this point.” That being said, we do not know exactly, at that moment, what the Beloved Disciple believed. It might be as simple as he believed Mary’s story. If this is the case, it has no bearing on what the disciple later came to believe.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, we naturally associate the “Beloved Disciple” with the person of John, yet the Gospel itself does not claim such an association, nor does any other book of Scripture. While there are many early sources from Church patriarchs that make the association, there are also early references that the “Beloved Disciple” represents the faithful believer of every age of the Church. It is good to remember that the dating of the Fourth Gospel is some 60-70 years after the time of Jesus.

Quoting Edwyn Hoskyns [*The Fourth Gospel*, 1947], Morris offers: “The pre-eminence of the faith of the Beloved Disciple is the climax of the narrative. His faith was not derived from ancient prophetic texts; the fact of the empty tomb illuminated the sense of scripture.”

That pre-eminence is the conviction that “The Easter faith means more than the conviction that a resuscitation has taken place; it includes understanding that the divine purpose revealed in Scripture has now taken place. It seems that John had now come to believe that the resurrection had taken place, but that he did not yet appreciate all that meant.” [Morris 737]

Assuming it was more than believing Mary’s report, the disciples were privileged to “see and believe.” And yet this presages Jesus’ later words to Thomas: “*Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.*” (John 20:29)

What about Peter? Did he see and not believe? The narrator is an external observer and refrains from offering what Peter believed. Perhaps the narrator is telling the Beloved Disciple’s story as his own.

“*For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead*” but they came to understand. In the meantime, they returned home (v.10)