



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: John 20:1-18

Background to the reading

Usually the next of kin would remain at home mourning for seven days. But Jesus' death was unusual for it happened on the Sabbath and his close relatives could not balsam his body as it was custom. Mary Magdalene, who would have grieved as much as the family, might have remained inside the house, had it not been necessary to complete the work left unfinished due to the Sabbath. But Jewish mourners as well as pagans were often known to visit tombs within the three days after the burial.

The first day of the week began at sundown on what we would call Saturday night, so the Sabbath had ended hours before Mary Magdalene approached the tomb. We know little about this woman other than that her name indicates that she was from Magdala in Galilee. Somewhere in Galilee she met Jesus, who cast seven demons out of her. She then joined the band of disciples and followed Jesus wherever he went ending up in Jerusalem at the foot of the cross when all the male disciples had fled. She observed Jesus' burial and witnessed the events surrounding the resurrection. Matthew, Mark, and Luke group her with the other women who went to the tomb. John says that she was the first among these women to discover the empty tomb, the first to report to the disciples, and the first to see the risen Christ as she lingered by the tomb after all the others had left.

The fact that Mary would approach the tomb before daylight demonstrates her eager devotion to Jesus. Disk-shaped stones were often rolled in front of the entrances of tombs and were so heavy that they frequently required several men to roll them away.

Her first reaction is that the authorities had taken Jesus' body out of the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple who we expect to be John, and told them the disturbing news. However, ancient Jewish men did not accept women as reliable witnesses for most legal purposes and this cultural tendency may further move John and Peter to look for themselves.

Had robbers stolen the body (a rare practice) they would have taken it in its wrappings; had they left the wrappings, they would have left them in disarray. Whoever left them, left them there neatly. The face cloth separate from the linen is not merely "folded up" but "rolled up", which could be an indication of neatness, or that it was still rolled the way it had been when it was wrapped around Jesus' head—that his body had risen straight out of the wrappings and cloth.

The skeptic's proposal that Jesus had only fainted and then recovered would not explain how he could have loosed the strips tied around him or escaped a sealed tomb!

The witness of women was worth little in Judaism; that Jesus first appears to a woman would not have been fabricated and shows us how Jesus' values differ from those of his culture. Even the later church did not always maintain Jesus' countercultural stance, and they would hardly have chosen such initial witnesses in an environment where this account would reinforce pagan prejudices against Christians.

Jewish people took the first seven days of mourning so seriously that mourners could not wash, work, have intercourse or even study the law. Jewish culture was serious about expressing rather than repressing grief. That the body is missing and thus people are prevented from bestowing final acts of love would be regarded as intolerably tragic; even tomb robbers usually left the body behind.

In Jewish tradition, angels could appear in different forms. Gardeners were at the bottom of the social scale, and a gardener there would have tended to the gardening, not to the tomb itself. But Mary has no better guess concerning his identity.

"Rabboni" means "my teacher" and is more personal and less formal than the title Rabbi. The verb translated "Touch me not" is in the Greek text an imperative and is probably better translated "Stop clinging to me". There is not a lot of time left for him on earth before his ascension.

Although she is a woman she must go and testify to such an important event.

Sermon

If there is one lecture I will never forget then it was the inaugural lecture of Professor Ann Wire from the San Francisco Theological Seminary. She called her lecture: "Hearing the voices" and her main emphasis was on the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. According to her it was Mary Magdalene who first witnessed the empty tomb but later her voice would be silenced in the letters of Paul, in the resurrection account in Acts and the tradition of the church. Hearing the voice again of Mary Magdalene is quite important to the message of Jesus' resurrection.

Her voice cannot be silenced just because she is a woman. In fact no voice can be silenced when it comes to testifying and proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. It is important for all followers of Jesus to convey and proclaim the good news that He is raised from the dead!

NO ONE must feel that his or her voice is less important than the other. Jesus came to earth and showed that everyone matters to him – even the most despicable sinner! In the eyes of God everyone that follows Him and obeys Him are His children. He said to all that suffer to come to Him because He will give them rest.

We cannot allow our world or family members or friends to "silence" us when we speak of Jesus' resurrection. We cannot allow anyone to stop us when we leap with joy. We must stop compromising our faith in the resurrection of Jesus and start living as people who saw the empty tomb!

A famous theologian once said when people argued that Jesus' couldn't have been resurrected that they must stop arguing about the resurrection and just start to live it! We can live it indeed in the way we approach life. If Christ is our focus, then our whole view of everything will surely be different. Instead of feeling hopeless after a funeral of a believer, we can now jump up and down because death does not exist

for the believer. If we get ill and feel helpless, we have the hope of the everlasting life. If we face difficulties and suffering, we can bear it because we know Jesus' Spirit is with us – helping us on our journeys. If things do not work out the way we want them to – we can have the assurance that there must be a very good reason for it.

And yes if we live by faith alone we will be able to say “I have seen the Lord”. When we walk in faith there will be many occasions where we will be aware of the presence of the Lord – in the way things work out and in the way things **do not** work out!

I mean there are so many occasions when we just feel so desperate and alone, wondering how things will work out. And then they do. Why? Because the Lord lets it happen!

So let us all go after this Holy week and say to everyone on the streets of Kirknewton and East Calder: I have seen the Lord. He has risen from the dead! Hallelujah! Praise His Name!

Amen