

The Proclamation

Today we celebrate Easter. We celebrate the finding of a stone rolled away, the finding of an empty tomb where a body had been left on a Friday evening. We celebrate with shouts of Alleluia, He is risen! That is our proclamation for this day. That last statement is our understanding of what is recorded in the two accounts read from the gospels this morning. This is the understanding which was reached early among the followers of Jesus of Nazareth after his death as recorded in the epistle reading from 1st Corinthians which we also read. That is the foundation upon which we still base our worship and faith. The two gospel narratives begin very much the same way...very early on the first day of the week...and the first to arrive are women. Even with these similar beginnings there are differences. Mark's narrative was the earliest one written about Jesus' life, while John's was the last one. For both, the central theme was that the tomb was discovered to be empty, how they described this discovery and what meaning they came to give to it has influenced our proclamations. When John begins the narrative it is still dark, while those arriving in Mark's account arrive after the sun has risen. According to Mark, Mary Magdalene comes with two other women bringing spices to anoint Jesus' body for proper ritual burial. As they come they are concerned about how they will manage to roll away the stone from the tomb opening. According to John, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone, without any stated purpose, only to discover that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb entrance. Her arrival in the dark is symbolic that for her the tomb is only empty...her Lord has been taken away; she does not yet know of the resurrection. Her response is to run back to inform Peter and another disciple of what she has seen. Although the words John records indicate she might not have been alone, for what is recorded as her message to the disciples is "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and WE do not know where they have laid him." The two disciples then run to the tomb to see for themselves what has happened. In John's gospel we always have this un-named disciple whom Jesus loved, this other disciple. In the race to the tomb, he is faster than Peter, but he does not enter the tomb until after Peter arrives; when Peter arrives, he does go in. What the disciples see when they enter is the linen wrapping placed around Jesus' body before he was placed in the tomb lying there, including the one which was wrapped around his head in a different place. The careful description of the handling of the linen body wrappings argues against a thief taking the body. John then tells us that the "other disciple believed" when he saw the state of the tomb and the wrappings. John does not elaborate about what it is that the "other disciple believed", just comments that "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. John then records that the disciples returned to their homes, the disciple who believed did not inform anyone else of what he believed: there was no proclamation. There is no joy or

word of hope spoken before they leave Mary weeping. John's gospel was the last of the gospel narratives written which probably explains that comment about their lack of understanding the scriptures. After the "disciples" leave, Mary Magdalene remains outside the tomb weeping, still grieving. Then she decides to also look inside, but what she sees is not discarded linen wrappings but two angels who question her about why she is weeping. Why neither "the other disciple" or Peter evidently saw angels, John does not say. Upon seeing them, Mary again complains that "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him". She then turns around, and as Jesus is standing behind her, since she doesn't recognize him; she seeks to find out where they have taken Jesus' body. Jesus then speaks her name and she knows him. Jesus does not appear to anyone inside the tomb; he has already left death and the tomb behind. Jesus then gives her some information and some instructions about what will happen. He is going to be ascending to God, not remaining with them; but she needs to go and tell the disciples that he is risen. In John's gospel, all three disciples who come to the tomb on that first Easter morn see that the tomb is empty, but only Mary tarries long enough to meet the risen Lord. And what does Mary then do. Mary goes and announces to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord." And she tells them what he had to her. Mary Magdalene made the first Easter proclamation according to John's gospel; she was the first bringer of the good news. Mark's gospel, despite beginning so similarly, as usual is briefer and different in many ways. To begin with, several women come with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. When they approach and see the stone rolled away, they don't flee but instead enter to find an alarming young man sitting on the right side of the platform. They are told not to be afraid because Jesus of Nazareth for whom they are looking isn't here because he has been raised. The place where they laid him is empty. They too are given a message to share with the disciples. "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." In both narratives, Jesus does not stay in the tomb. In Mark's gospel, he even leaves the immediate area of Jerusalem and goes back to Galilee. However, unlike John's gospel, Mark does not leave us with a proclamation at this point, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The oldest copies of Mark's narrative actually seem to end in this manner; although later texts have additional verses. Despite this ending, or the attempts of later writers to amend the texts, it is obvious that the women must not have truly kept silent. Or perhaps, it was the appearances of Jesus in Galilee that are not described at all in Mark, but which the "young man" in the tomb referred which made the first proclamations possible. When confronted with this ending, it helps to remember how Mark begins his narrative: it is with the assertion: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The key to both these narratives about that first morning of discovery is that Jesus did not remain in the tomb...in this day and age, I think many

have become too attached to staying inside the walls of our church buildings...have begun to think of them as the church...when Jesus immediately was outside and going about in the world he had come to redeem. In the time between the resurrection and ascension, the time he spent with the disciples, he continued to teach them and prepare them for the mission he wished them to complete. So on this Easter Sunday, as we think about the empty tomb...we have no reason to weep, no lingering grief over our lost Lord; we know that the darkness was defeated. So what is our proclamation? Sometimes since Easter is now an annual event on everyone's calendar, a day when often we begin with the refrain: Christ Is Risen! How do we keep that proclamation current; how do we keep it in the present tense? Because that is the true meaning of what we celebrate, not just on this particular Sunday, but each and every Sunday. We gather as the body of Christ, proclaiming that we belong to a risen Lord who IS, who is present with us to comfort, give aid and when we seek his presence to just be with us. Perhaps the best proclamation is the one which Mary Magdalene gave: "I have seen the Lord." The resurrection of Jesus is not, or at least it should not be, a third person confession, but a first person testimony...it is should not just be the doctrine you learn about but should be your lived experience...a truth that you know and can witness to and that can be seen in the way that you live daily. To say "I have seen the Lord" is to point out resurrection in the midst of ruin, new life when all that seems visible is death; love in the face of hate; decency and goodness when that which is vitriolic and vile finds only more and more followers and space to be spewed. "I have seen the Lord" insists that the ways of love will win over the ways of hate; it confirms that the truth of kindness can be heard over the din of ruthless, callous and vindictive rhetoric; it gives witness to the fact that there is another way of being in this world—a way of being that is shaped by the resurrection, that embodies anything and everything that is life-giving, a way of being that is so counter-cultural, so demonstrative of mercy, that it is a testimony and witness and makes you wonder: "Did I just see the Lord?" A way of living that is a spreading the gospel news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.