

John 20:1-18

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. 2So 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.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and 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. 13They 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.” 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus 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.’” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

"Easter Is"

John 20: 1 - 18

Easter Sunday

La Habra UMC
by Rev. Dr. Soomee Kim

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Last Sunday we closed the worship with stripping down the alter symbolizing the coming of the Holy Week. In the Tenebrae service Thursday, we completely darkened the sanctuary symbolizing the death of Jesus. We experienced how our Savior, who came in the name of Love, took the last breath of his earthly life on that terrible cross.

And three days later we are celebrating Easter. The sanctuary is dressed in white and gold. The chancel area is decorated with flowers. We have special music... What happened in these three days? What brought this change in our mood?

Maundy Thursday is about Love demonstrating how to love. Maundy Thursday is about Love saying good-bye to those he loved. Good Friday is about the death of Love. Love died that day. "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit. It is finished!"

Then Love bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Somber Saturday is about Love being silenced. Love was laid in a tomb. His followers were still in hiding, in mourning, and in despair.

And Easter is about the return of Love. At sunrise, the earth around the tomb trembled. The rock rolled away to reveal an empty grave. Easter is about Love returning.

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Some of you probably have heard this lovely legend which describes the meaning of Easter in a very simple but profound manner: A priest found a branch of a thorn tree, twisted around so that it resembled a crown of thorns. Thinking it a symbol of the crucifixion, he placed it on the altar in his chapel on Good Friday.

Like many priests and ministers on the Holy Week, the priest was quite busy. Writing additional sermons and leading multiple services, he completely forgot about the crown of thorns.

His church must not have the dedicated volunteers like we do here at La Habra. who make sure everything is ready for worship before Sunday morning.

Early on Easter morning the priest remembered he had still left the crown of thorns on the altar. Feeling it was not appropriate for Easter Sunday, he hurried into the church to clear it away before the congregation came. But when he entered the sanctuary, his nose picked up a faint fragrance that was quite unfamiliar in that old church building.

On the altar, he found the thorn branches blossoming with beautiful roses. The crown of thorns became the crown of lovely new flowers. On that Easter Sunday this priest, quite unexpectedly, was confronted with the symbol of resurrection.

Easter is the beginning of new life. Easter is about Love returning.

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What happened between that Good Friday and the Easter Sunday is a mystery. As much as we don't know what goes on inside the thorny branch to make it bloom with beautiful flowers, or inside the little seed to grow into an apple tree, or inside the cocoon to change a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly, we don't know how it happened that the dead body that laid in the tomb on that Friday evening was not there on Sunday morning.

They all thought that it was finished, when Love took his last breath, and had fallen into the realm of death from which he could never return. They all put the period at the end of the sentence and closed the book of history.

But Love turned around and came back.

Easter is the power that reverses the irreversible. Easter is the beginning of new life. Easter is about Love returning. No wonder John's gospel describes that Easter morning as, "early on the first day of the week" in verse 1 of 20th chapter. With Easter the new day had dawned. Darkness had not yet totally disappeared. But the light of the new day kept growing on the horizon.

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We don't know how the miracle happened. **We only know how the three people found out.** Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. When she noticed that the stone which had blocked the entrance to the tomb was removed, she ran and informed Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Many biblical scholars agree that the disciple whom Jesus loved is John, who also is the writer of this Gospel. John and Peter both ran to the tomb. John ran faster, perhaps because he was younger... but he stopped at the entrance of the tomb.

v. 5, "John bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in."

This sentence describes what John did and saw.... Sort of giving the affirmation that John must be the author or someone close to John heard what John noticed as he paused there at the entrance of the tomb.

While John was looking in, Peter caught up with him. Peter, the quick tempered, straight forward person, Peter, as usual, didn't hesitate. Peter may be older, but he went in with full force. Without a second thought he dashed into the tomb and noticed there was no body but linen and head wrappings instead. John now stepped into the tomb.

The two quite different disciples acted in different rhythms. But there is one and the same motivation – Perhaps as they ran, they might have remembered what Jesus kept telling him.

The Lord said he would die but would return.... Can it be? Did he really?

And the scripture says, "He saw and believed." John saw the empty tomb and the linen and head wrappings left behind.

The things Jesus talked about while he was alive, what the prophets had said in the Old Testament, they all made sense to him at that moment. The messiah would be killed but be raised from the dead, conquering death. And he became a believer.

St. Augustine, the fourth century theologian, once said, "*Jesus departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find him. For he departed, and behold, he is here.*"

Easter is about the change in our perspective. Easter is refocusing back on what we have missed when we depended solely on our logic and perceptions. Easter is believing what our eyes can not see.

Easter is the power that reverses the irreversible, the beginning of new life, and Love returning.

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And the two disciples returned to their homes. Mary, however still lingered on. She was determined to find out what happened to the body of Jesus. So she waited.

Mary was first found by Jesus when she was lost, and now she was seeking the body of Jesus lost by her. She said to the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." Even to the angels she met in the tomb, Mary repeated the same statement. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." Jesus had appeared to her, but she did not recognize him at first. Instead she said, "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

She had only one explanation. Since she knew Jesus was dead, other people must have taken his body away.

Do we also have a dead Jesus that can be manipulated by others? How often do we consider Jesus as an object without life that can be molded to fit our purposes? How frequently do we take life out of Jesus and make him a puppet to dance to our hand motions?

How often our dead images of Christ prevent us from seeing the living Christ in our lives? But Mary finally recognized him when Jesus called her by her name.

Easter is about recognizing the living Christ in the world. Easter is about meeting the living Christ face to face in every corner of our lives.

As instructed by Jesus, Mary went and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Easter is also about proclaiming what we believe.

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There is a Charlie Brown cartoon strip where Lucy asks, "Why do you think we're put on earth, Charlie Brown?" Charlie replies, "To make others happy." Lucy says, "I don't think I'm making anyone very happy Of course, nobody's making me very happy either." Then in the final pane, Lucy screams at the top of her lungs.... "SOMEBODY'S NOT DOING HIS JOB!"

Easter is about doing our job, proclaiming what we have witnessed to everyone we meet and to the world. Easter is about sharing our faith. Easter is meeting the living Christ everyday. Easter is believing what our eyes can't see. Easter is the power that reverses the irreversible. Easter is the beginning of new life. Easter is about Love returning.

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It is said to have happened in a small midwestern town many years ago. It was around midnight when the town's fire siren began to shriek, summoning the volunteer firefighters to their stations. When the firemen arrived at the scene, they found a small two-story home being consumed by the roaring flames. The best they could hope to do was contain the fire and keep it from spreading to nearby homes. A crowd had already gathered and most were thinking that surely by now the entire family had perished.

But it was not so! A little boy's cries for help could be heard above the crackling of the blaze. But no one seemed to know what to do, as the front of the house was a mass of flames. Everyone stood frozen in fear and uncertainty.

Just then a stranger, a man new to the community, rushed from the crowd. He circled around back, where he spotted an iron pipe that went up the side of the house and ran very near an upstairs window. Up he went, crashed through the window and disappeared inside the burning house.

Seconds later he reappeared with the little boy in his arms. Amid the cheers of the crowd, he climbed down the hot pipe as the boy hung around his neck.

Several weeks later, a public hearing was held in the town hall to determine into whose custody the orphaned boy would be placed. There were quite a few who wanted the custody of the boy. Maybe because he was a wonderful person, or maybe because many were feeling guilty for not doing much to save him on the night of the fire. So each person wanting the boy was allowed to speak briefly.

The first man said. "I have a big farm. Young boys need the our-of-doors. He should live with me." A woman spoke up, "I am a teacher. I have a fine library of great books. I can give him an excellent education. He should come with me." Some others spoke their piece and finally the richest man in the town stood on his feet and said, "I am wealthy. I could give the lad everything mentioned tonight, a farm, an education and more - including money and travel. My wife and I would like to have him in our home."

From the back of the room rose a man who had slipped in unnoticed. As he walked toward the front, deep suffering showed in his face. He walked over to where the young boy sat with his eyes fixed to the floor. Slowly, the man removed his hands from his pockets. A gasp went up from the crowd.

At that, the little boy looked up to see the horribly scarred hands of the stranger who had rescued him - the stranger whose hands had been so badly burned, as he had climbed the hot pipe at the back of the house.

From the boy's mouth there came a cry of recognition. With a leap, the boy threw his arms around the stranger's neck once more and held on for dear life.

The farmer rose and left; the teacher, too; and then the rich man. Everyone departed, leaving the boy in the care of the person who had won him without so much as a word.

Those scarred hands spoke more than any words that could have been uttered. The boy belonged to the one who had saved him.

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Easter tells us who we are and to whom we belong. We belong to Christ—the one who went into the fire for us, who bears the scars of love, and who calls us by name. Those scarred hands of Jesus, nailed, not burned, still reach for us, not to claim ownership, but to give us life. And when we recognize him—when we truly see the living Christ—we discover again who we are.

So Easter is not only something we celebrate; it is something we live. It is meeting the living Christ in ordinary days. It is believing even when our eyes cannot yet see. It is trusting that God's love is stronger than death, despair, and defeat.

This is the power of Easter: Love returns. Love reverses what seems irreversible. Love opens a new beginning where we thought the story had ended.

May we leave this place, like Mary, able to say with conviction and joy, “I have seen the Lord.”

And may that living Christ be made known through our words, our compassion, and our lives—today, and every day.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Risen God,
we give you thanks that Love did not stay in the tomb.
When we thought the story was over, you opened a new beginning.

Call us by name again, O Christ.
Open our eyes to recognize your living presence even when it is still dark in our lives.
Turn us around when we have lost hope, and help us believe what our eyes cannot yet see.

Send us out, like Mary, to live and proclaim the good news:
Love has returned. We have seen the Lord.

In the name of the Risen Christ we pray.
Amen.