

What Do We Do Now?

John 20:1-10

John Breon

Let's hear another version of the resurrection story from C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan, the great Lion, the King and true ruler of Narnia, has offered himself in place of a traitor, the boy Edmond. The forces of evil have slain Aslan and left his body on the great Stone Table. After the evil army left, the girls Susan and Lucy stayed near the body of Aslan. Now they're looking east toward the sea and the edge of the sun has just come up over the horizon.

At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate.

"What's that?" said Lucy, clutching Susan's arm.

"I—I feel afraid to turn round," said Susan; "something awful is happening."

"They're doing something worse to *him*," said Lucy. "Come on!" And she turned, pulling Susan round with her.

The rising of the sun had made everything look so different—all the colours and shadows were changed—that for a moment they didn't see the important thing. Then they did. The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan.

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried the two girls rushing back to the Table.

"Oh, it's *too* bad," sobbed Lucy; "they might have left the body alone."

"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?"

"Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane ... stood Aslan himself.

"Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy.

"Not now," said Aslan.

"You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word *ghost*.

Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

"Do I look it?" he said.

"Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.

"But what does it all mean?" asked Susan.... (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Collier ed., 1970, pp. 158-59)

I'm sure the disciples wondered what it all meant when they saw the empty tomb and the grave clothes and even as they later began to see the risen Jesus.

If children's stories aren't your thing, let's think about another story. Do you remember Lt. Dan in *Forrest Gump*? Lt. Dan is Forrest's commanding officer in Viet Nam. Instead of fulfilling what he thought was his destiny of dying in battle, Lt. Dan loses his legs in battle. In the hospital he confronts Forrest about this and then slumps hopelessly as he asks, "What am I gonna do now?"

That's another good question that the disciples must have faced. It's a question we face as we celebrate Easter again. Let's join the disciples at the empty tomb in the garden, in the upper room in Jerusalem, and on the lakeshore in Galilee. We'll see what the disciples did and we'll see what we're called to do, what we can do now.

Early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried on Friday. All four Gospels mention Mary as one of the first to find the empty tomb. The other three include other women with her, but John focuses on Mary. She had followed Jesus from Galilee and was present when he died and when he was buried.

She comes to the tomb and sees that the stone had been moved from the entrance. Assuming that someone had broken in and stolen or

moved Jesus' body, she runs to find Simon Peter and another disciple. This other disciple, called "the one Jesus loved," is the apostle John, son of Zebedee. Mary tells them that someone has taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, "and we don't know where they have put him!"

This story is realistic. It doesn't seem to have been made up. In that time, if you were making up a story like this, you wouldn't have a woman be the first witness. Women's testimony wasn't even acceptable in a Jewish court. Also, notice that Mary and the others don't immediately think that Jesus had risen from the dead. Instead, they make the natural assumption that someone took his body.

Peter and John take off to see the tomb. John outruns Peter and gets there first. He stoops over and looks through the entrance. He sees the linen burial cloths lying there, but he doesn't go in. When Peter arrives, true to form, he barges right into the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings lying there. He also sees the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. It's rolled up by itself, apart from the wrappings.

While Peter looks at all this, John also goes in. He sees and believes. What did John see? And what did he believe? First, he saw that the tomb was empty. Jesus' body wasn't there. Then he saw how the burial wrappings were arranged. He realizes that Jesus' body hadn't been stolen. What grave robber would take the time to unwrap the body and neatly fold up the cloth? It's interesting to note here that this all sounds like an eyewitness account, which it is. It's also interesting to compare this account with the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. When Lazarus came out of his tomb, he was still wrapped up and the cloth was still around his face. Lazarus wasn't coming out of the grave permanently—he would die again. Jesus would never need grave clothes again. He left behind all the old stuff of death.

What did John believe? Though his faith wasn't fully formed, he was beginning to realize that Jesus was alive. Perhaps he thought that Jesus had already returned to the Father as he had said he would. Maybe other things that Jesus had said that didn't make sense at the time were beginning to come clear. Like when waking up from a dream, John's about to grasp the truth but his thoughts are still sluggish. He hasn't yet made the

connections. He and Peter still don't realize that the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), rightly understood, pointed to Jesus' resurrection. John has the beginnings of resurrection faith, but he hasn't seen the Lord yet. The risen Jesus for him, so far, was an absent Jesus. He simply saw that Jesus wasn't in the tomb (J. Ramsey Michaels, *John: A Good News Commentary*).

We hear the report of the empty tomb. We hear the witnesses who saw Jesus alive. What do we do now? One thing we can do is *believe*. Maybe your believing is sort of in its infancy, kind of unformed, like John's was. But it's there. It's developing. Early in this Gospel, after Jesus' first miraculous sign, it says that his disciples believed in him or put their faith in him. They continued to believe through the various signs Jesus did and the things he taught. Jesus encouraged them to believe in God and to believe in him. Now John takes another step of believing. So can we.

Later in this chapter, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples. Thomas, who wasn't with them the first time Jesus appeared to them, is there this time. He had said he wouldn't believe unless he saw Jesus' scars. Jesus shows his scars and offers for Thomas to touch his wounds. He tells Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe." Thomas says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (24-29). Have you claimed, do you claim Jesus as Lord and God?

Right after this, the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus did many other signs that weren't written in this book. "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (31).

"Believing" means more than mentally acknowledging something or someone. To believe is also to trust and to rely on the Lord. Faith or believing also includes giving our allegiance to Jesus our King and remaining loyal to him. We have confidence in him, we trust him, we commit ourselves to be loyal to him and to follow him.

Back at the empty tomb: After Peter and John leave, Mary Magdalene stays. She sees angels in the tomb who speak to her. Then she sees another figure in the garden. She thinks he's the gardener, so she asks if he's taken

Jesus' body away. But the "gardener" is Jesus. He's planting new life. He's cultivating new creation. He speaks her name, "Mary." Then she recognizes him, she knows him.

What do we do now? We can stay, we can encounter Jesus and recognize him. Mary Magdalene was the first to find the tomb empty, the first to see the risen Lord, and the first to tell the news that Jesus is alive. But he would appear to the others as well. He comes to a group of disciples hiding in a locked room out of fear. Later he appears to the same group plus Thomas. In chapter 21, he appears to a group of disciples on the Sea of Galilee. In the boat, seeing Jesus on shore and having caught a huge load of fish, John recognizes Jesus and says, "It's the Lord!"

Discipleship starts with Jesus' invitation to "come and see." All through this Gospel, Jesus reveals God the Father. Jesus says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). "Seeing" in those places is a way of talking about faith. We don't literally see Jesus. But by faith we perceive him, we recognize him, we know him. And, as he told Thomas, "Blessed are those who don't see and yet believe." We're blessed as we believe.

In a New Testament letter, Peter writes about Jesus, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Because Jesus is risen, because he's exalted and enthroned as King and Lord, because the Holy Spirit is here and makes Jesus' presence real, we can encounter Jesus. We can know him. We can live in relationship with him through faith. That can start today for you. It can continue, you can grow in that relationship every day.

On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together with the doors locked. They feared that the people who had killed Jesus might come after them. Jesus came and stood among them. Jesus' resurrection body is physical, but it's transformed and has the ability to appear in a locked room and various other locations.

When Jesus stands among them, he says, "Peace be with you." He repeats that blessing. Then he says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

What do we do now? We receive. We can receive the presence of the living Lord in our midst. We can take his peace. That's the wholeness, the well-being, the salvation he offers. We can receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, God's personal and powerful presence within us. The Holy Spirit is Jesus in the present tense. We can invite him to be with us, to be in us, to be in our thoughts, in our actions, in our relationships. We can live in God's presence every day.

The Holy Spirit isn't here just to make us feel good. The Spirit comes with power for mission, for service, for witness. Jesus says he's sending us the way he was sent. Our lives can take the shape of his life. Humility, suffering, dying and rising. He gives authority to forgive and to announce the forgiveness of sins. All of that comes from the Holy Spirit's power at work in us.

In the last chapter of John's Gospel, some of the disciples are back at the Sea of Galilee. Simon Peter decides to go fishing. Six others join him. What do we do now? We go into the real world, into our jobs, our occupations and do what we can, do what we know to do.

But after fishing all night, these disciples catch nothing. That's when they see the stranger on the shore who calls out to them, asking if they've caught anything. When they say, "No," he tells them to throw their net on the right side of the boat. They do this and catch so many fish they can't haul the net in.

This is when John recognizes that the stranger on the shore is Jesus. When John says, "It's the Lord!" Peter jumps in the water and goes to Jesus. Jesus is cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire. Jesus has recreated the scene of Peter's call and of his failure—there was a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard when Peter was there denying Jesus.

Now Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" As Peter had denied Jesus three times, now he is able to affirm his love and devotion and commitment three times. And each time Jesus gives him the commission,

“Feed my sheep.” Jesus still has a purpose for Peter and the others. He forgives and restores and calls again.

What do we do now? We can be forgiven for when we’ve denied the Lord. We can be restored from when we’ve failed the Lord. We can be given a new mission and purpose and calling from the Lord. Will we accept what Jesus offers? Will we receive his call and go where he sends us?

Jesus tells Peter that someday Peter will give his life and repeats the call: “Follow me.” Peter asks about Jesus’ plans for John. Jesus tells Peter, “That’s not your business. You must follow me.”

What are we gonna do now? We can follow Jesus. We can renew our commitment to follow him. He’s the Word who was with God and was God and who became human. He’s the one who was sent from the Father, full of grace and truth. He’s the one who teaches and heals. He’s the one who says, “I Am.” He’s the one who laid down his life on the cross to show us God’s love and to save us. He’s the risen Lord. He’s alive and rules in glory. He’s present in the Holy Spirit. He’s someone we can know and trust and follow. What will we do now?