

Race to the Tomb

The Gospel of John has a story to tell this morning. Let's try not to get distracted by other details you may know from other Easter accounts. This morning, let's focus all of our attention on this amazing story that John has to tell.

The story begins this way: *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.*

While it was still dark. In this story, it is not sunrise, or first light of dawn creeping over the horizon. It is dark. Mary Magdalene is walking in the dark, by herself, approaching the tomb where Jesus had been laid two days earlier.

Is she out of her mind? Is she so numbed by grief that she has lost her senses? According to Jewish zoning ordinances, a tomb must be located well away from any populated area, which means this is a long walk. Furthermore, Jews were prohibited from having contact with the dead, which means no respectable person will be anywhere near the area.

Mary Magdalene is taking a bold risk, especially in a society that does not treat women well. What is she going to do if she encounters someone out here in the dark where respectable people don't go? She had to have been carrying some kind of torch to find her way. That light would have given her away to anyone who happened to be in the area. She is as vulnerable a target as you're going to find.

The question is, what does she need to do that is so important that she will undertake not only the inconvenience of getting up at that hour and walking all that way in the darkness, but is willing to risk the danger that comes with it?

The question becomes even more intriguing when she arrives at her destination and discovers that the stone has been removed from the tomb's entrance. Clearly, she was not expecting this. Mary was expecting the tomb to be sealed by that stone, because that's the way you did things back then.

Among those who could afford it, burial took place in an above-ground cavern, carved into rock. They didn't just leave the tomb open to any scavenger who may be attracted to it. The Jews *always* sealed up these tombs with a large, heavy stone immediately after burial to keep animals out.

In other words, Mary Magdalene knew the tomb would be closed to her. So why go? Why take this risk just to see a big rock blocking a tomb?

The Gospel of John does not tell us why she went there that morning. We are left to imagine, and all I can think of was that she was in shock, overcome by grief. In the span of less than a week, her world with its promise of peace and fulfillment has come crashing down on her. All her hopes and dreams were cruelly dashed in a brutal tragedy.

Nothing makes sense to her anymore. She cannot begin to decide where to go from here. I once saw a movie about a dog who was so devoted to his master that he always greeted him at the train station when he returned from work. When the man died, the dog dutifully continued the ritual. Every day for many years, he would go to the train station at the appointed hour and wait for the master who would never come.

Mary Magdalene seems caught in a similar rut. Stumbling about without any reason for hope, without a sense of purpose or the ability to process what has happened, she cannot think or act rationally.

All she can do is to go back to the tomb, to get as close as she can to where her hope was when she lost it. To get as close as she can to the one who was supposed to redeem the world. Maybe she will say a prayer, maybe she will just grieve for what could have been. Maybe she is incapable of making any plans at all and will just sit there in a daze.

But in the light of her lamp, she sees a shocking sight. The stone is gone. The tomb lies wide open. That isn't right! Someone must have done this. Who? And why? What could possibly explain this?

The only answer that occurs to her is that it had to be Jesus' enemies. Who else would be so disrespectful of the dead? When did they do this? Are they still lurking around the tomb?

This fresh encounter with the unspeakable evil that has ravaged her world in the past week both sickens and terrifies her. She takes off running, as fast as she can, stumbling in the darkness--heading for the only people she can trust—Jesus' disciples.

She finds Peter and the unnamed disciple, whom I am going to call John, because after all this is the Gospel written by John's followers and admirers, and it just makes

sense. Breathlessly, she tells them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!”

The two disciples immediately take off running toward the tomb. We can assume that by the time Mary has come all this way, morning has started to break. Mary Magdalene, who needs some time to catch her breath, trails far behind.

Why are the disciples in such a hurry? Why are they so inconsiderate of Mary that they leave her behind to fend for herself? Do they actually think they are going to accomplish something by speeding over to the tomb? If someone really has taken Jesus’ body, there is literally nothing they can do about it. They are not going to get him back.

These enemies are powerful and deadly and have shown they will stop at nothing to get their way. Ever since the events of Friday, the disciples have been in hiding in fear of these enemies. The fact is Peter and John had better hope they *don’t* run into them alone out here in the countryside.

Perhaps a clue as to what they are thinking is found in the fact that at first the two disciples run together, and then suddenly it turns into a race. We are told that John pulls ahead and wins the race with Peter, which seems a curiously unnecessary and even inappropriate detail to provide.

At least it would be if all it indicates is that John is faster or in better physical shape. But what if this information is included to show something else about John? Perhaps it shows that, as the disciple closest to Jesus, he reacts to Mary Magdalene’s shocking news with unbearable anguish. He runs with Peter until, driven by the increasing despair at this latest news, he rushes blindly toward the tomb to learn the truth.

He arrives first and immediately goes a step beyond what Mary had done: he actually peaks inside the tomb. What he sees confirms that Jesus is gone. The linen wrappings are lying in a heap on the bench where the body is supposed to be.

Curiously, though, he who was so frantic to get to the tomb as quickly as possible suddenly puts on the brakes. He doesn’t go in.

It may be that now that the moment has arrived, he’s afraid of what else he will find in there. It could be he feared breaking Jewish laws that forbid contact with the dead. The fact that tombstones were usually painted white to warn away anyone who

accidentally stumbled upon a gravesite demonstrates how seriously this was taken in their culture.

Or maybe something entirely different is going on in his mind. We'll get back to that. But for now, John does nothing until Peter arrives.

What is Peter thinking as he approaches the tomb? He has spent the past two days eaten up by shame over his cowardly denial of Jesus. Replaying it over and over in his mind. Wishing for a chance to do it over again so that he can redeem himself, and knowing that won't come. This may be the closest chance he will ever get.

Peter is determined to display no cowardice this time. Although aware that it is a case of too little, too late, he boldly steps past John and in the service of his Lord walks into the tomb without worrying about the consequences.

There he finds more evidence of what John has seen—that not only is Jesus gone but that all the burial wrappings around his head were left behind. What can this possibly mean? Given the events of recent days, one can easily imagine that Jesus enemies had come to inflict a final indignity on him.

At this point John gets up the gumption to follow Peter into the tomb. There he sees what Peter sees, but the Gospel makes a curious distinction. It says that this disciple “saw and believed.” It doesn't say what he believes, only that whatever he believes has nothing to do with the prophecy that Jesus had given about his death and what would happen afterward.

So what is it that he believes? This question invites us to look back on that race to the tomb. It could be that Mary Magdalene's news had a curious effect on him. Something happened at the tomb. Jesus is gone.

Could there be a glimmer of hope that, given the astounding abilities Jesus had shown in his ministries, he somehow pulled off an even greater miracle than anything they had yet seen?

As this idea occurs to John, he gets a burst of adrenaline. *What if? What if?* He's well aware that he is probably just grasping at straws. That this is just proof that he is in deep denial. And yet, what if?

When he sees what is in the tomb, it only adds to his curiosity. If someone took Jesus' body, why would they take the time to carefully unwrap it? And why wouldn't they roll the stone back when they were finished to cover up their crime?

The flame of hope that had been all but extinguished by the events of Good Friday suddenly rekindles in him. Hoping for a miracle even after death seems irrational, but now John dares to imagine the possibility that it may have happened.

The gospel writer conspicuously refrains from saying that Peter was thinking the same thing. As they left the tomb and headed home, I wonder if the two of them had a discussion or even a debate about this.

The story simply notes that, whatever they were thinking, neither of the disciples connected the disappearance with what Jesus had told them about his mission in the world—about death and resurrection.

While the two are on their way home, an exhausted Mary Magdalene finally arrives back at the tomb. Again, it would have been considerate of the disciples to at least wait for her, and let her know what they were thinking or if they planned any action to solve this mystery, or at least offer some mutual support.

But no, they're gone and she's left all alone with her grief, and bewilderment. That's too bad. Had the two disciples been a little more caring and compassionate, they could have experienced the single most euphoric moment in all history.

In the midst of overwhelming pain and sadness and despair, Mary Magdalene discovers that, against all odds, everything is not lost. The forces of hatred and violence and lies that seemed invincible have not prevailed. They have been obliterated by love.

God rules the universe after all. God not only created life but rebuilds and restores it. Love and compassion and justice are not just wistful ideas and empty wishes—they are the unshakable foundation of this universe God created.

She hurries back down the trail one more time, with a message for Jesus' followers. This is the most strenuous aerobic workout of her life, but this time she's running on air. This time, her fear and despair have given way to indescribable joy.

This time she delivers an entirely different message from the message of anguish she delivered earlier—a message that will set off an explosion of celebration so earth-shaking that it will change all of human history.

We are still reliving and celebrating this story of the empty tomb today. Every day, people approach that tomb as Mary Magdalene did: caught in life's rut of quiet desperation. Numb with grief. Crushed by loss.

Stumbling about without any reason for hope in a world where evil seems to have the upper hand. Trying to find something to hang on to, to find some meaning to existence.

Every day, people approach that tomb as Peter did: filled with shame from the past. Haunted by regret for things done or left undone. Battling their fears. Beaten down by failure. Longing for a second chance that they doubt will come.

Every day, people approach that tomb as the unknown disciple did, desperately clinging to hope. Trying hard to believe in God. Searching for reasons to trust that truth, love, justice, and peace are not just naïve illusions. Sifting through the confusion and doubts and inconsistencies for something, anything, to hold onto.

For anyone who has ever experienced pain or suffering, grief or despair, shame or regret, confusion or bitterness or injustice, the message of Easter morning comes as an explosion of surprise and relief and joy.

Today we race to the tomb to find Jesus is risen and we are alive. God rules the universe after all. Love and compassion and justice are not just wistful ideas and empty wishes but are the truth—they are the unshakable foundation of this universe God created.

It's almost enough to make even a Midwesterner break out in Alleluias. Let's stand and test that theory with our sermon hymn.