I recently read a story about a children’s Sunday school teacher who was teaching a class on Easter morning. She was trying to get the children involved in the story by helping them picture Jesus coming out of the tomb alive. She asked the question, “What do you think was the first thing that Jesus said when he stepped out of the tomb?” A little girl in the back of the class jumped up waving her hand in the air and saying, “I know, I know!” the teacher looked at her and said OK Bethany, what do you think was the first thing Jesus said as he stepped out of the tomb?” and the little girl through both arms in the air and shouted “Ta-DA!”

Now I doubt if that was what Jesus said but I do love the sense of celebration that the little girl was bringing to the most important event in history. The Apostle Paul pointed out that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which Christianity was built. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:14–19,

> And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.  
> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.  
> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.  
> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.  
> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.  
> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Certainly Jesus showed tremendous love in going to the cross for our sins but the moral influence of this love, though touching has minimal value. If Jesus remained dead then there is no redemption and the crucifixion without
resurrection grants no forgiveness. However, the Bible and the witnesses that we see in our gospel narrative insist that Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried—rose from the dead and this is the best news anyone could ever hear. Remember that the disciples and the women who followed after Jesus had seen him die and placed in a tomb. The previous two days they had been experiencing the darkest grief, hopelessness and guilt that you can imagine. What was about to be revealed to them would change the direction of their lives forever as they became the living witnesses to the truth of the resurrection. A resounding “Ta-DA!” is not inappropriate in my opinion.

Let’s consider our gospel passage from John 20:1–18 but begin with verses 1–3:

> Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. "So 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.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb.

It’s Sunday morning and Mary and some unnamed other women, probably the ones who had stayed with Jesus in vigil while he was on the cross (according to Mark and Luke’s accounts of this event) go to the tomb while it is still dark outside and see that the stone has been rolled away from the opening of the tomb. Perhaps they left at dark hoping to not be seen and identified as disciples of Jesus by those who had hated him or maybe they felt that they needed to quickly complete the proper burial customs on his body begun by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus on Friday. Mary sees the stone rolled away and assumes that someone has removed the body of Jesus. Tomb robbery was not that uncommon as a matter of fact one of the Caesars had made the disturbance of graves or tombs a capital offense. Perhaps she thought that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had come and taken the body away for some reason. Either way Mary runs to where Peter and John are staying to inform them that the body of Jesus is missing. They race to the tomb and what they find initially is very important.
Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

John is the first one into the tomb and as he looks in and he sees the linen cloths lying there but he doesn’t go in. The Greek language has several words for “seeing” and this is the most common one—he simply saw it there. Verse 6 records that Peter now arrives and he saw the cloths lying but a different word for seeing is used. It implies not just observing something but comprehending what it means. Then in verse 8 John enters the tomb and now he sees but again a different word is used (eido) and it includes the idea of experiencing what is observed. The word used for seeing here is the same word for knowing in Luke 4:34 where a demon possessed man runs up to Jesus and cries out, “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know (eido) who you are—the Holy One of God.” The result of John seeing in this way leads him to believe that something amazing had just happened and he was a witness to it. What was it that he saw that made him believe?

First, he saw the “linen cloths.” Bodies were prepared for burial first by coating them with sticky spices (including myrrh) then wrapping them tightly in cloths. The result was essentially a glued wrapping, which is why, when Jesus resurrected Lazarus the first thing he told them to do was to remove the grave cloths. John sees that and realizes that no one stole the body. The cloths were still there and intact but lying flat because the body was gone. It seems that Jesus’ body simply passed through the grave clothes in much the same way that he would walk through a locked door in verse 19 of this chapter. Second, he saw the face cloth normally used to hold the jaw in place folded in a place by itself. Unlike the body wrappings, covered as they were with the spices, the face and head cloth was not treated. That cloth was clean. So after
the resurrection, Christ (or an angel) carefully folded it up. This does not suggest that a robbery had taken place but that everything was done without haste and very calm. It’s as if Jesus were leaving evidence that would point them to fact that he was now alive, no longer dead.

John is showing us at the end of verse 8 that he still did fully understand the Scriptures about the resurrection but things that Jesus had told them were now coming into focus. This kind of simple faith had been true of the disciples throughout the Gospel of John and it began with the first sign at the Wedding Feast in Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine and “and his disciples believed in Him”(2:11). It’s this kind of simple faith that allows us to respond to what we see and hear in God’s presence and activity, even though a deep understanding of it has not yet been developed. The Holy Spirit allowed John to reason that the body had not been stolen because the grave clothes had been left behind neatly placed. If Jesus had merely woken up and struggled to get out of the grave clothes then surely there would be a sign of that struggle which would have been a real ordeal considering that 75 lbs. of spices held them together. No something else happened and John senses God’s fingerprint at the scene even though he doesn't yet see the full meaning. John writes that he and Peter left the tomb and went back to their homes. It doesn't tell us any more than that, like what they talked about or how they felt now but I suspect that the darkness of the past two days is starting to recede and is replaced by a glimmer of hope.

Let’s read John 20:11–16,

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They 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.” ¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

At this point I think it helpful to remember who Mary Magdalene was. Luke 8:1–2 tells us,

Soon afterward he (Jesus) went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him,² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out ...

I have often thought about how Mary Magdalene must have viewed Jesus. She had been possessed by seven demons and he had set her free and then allowed her and several other women to follow him. Rabbis refused to teach women but Jesus was different, he not only set her free from the torture of the demonic but he allowed her to become a part of his family. Now she alone is at the tomb weeping possibly because she senses more deeply the depth and totality of the loss experienced by Jesus’ death. The last few days have taken a heavy toll on her emotions and now she gives in to the crushing weight that she feels at the tomb of the one she loves so dearly. I love the tender scene that John lays out for us when Mary enters the tomb. She thinks that she is all alone but that was not true. There were angels in front of her and Jesus behind her and the first thing she sees upon entering the tomb was two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been. Usually when someone encounters an angel there is stark terror and most people fall on their faces crying out. That’s not what Mary needs and so Jesus either keeps her from realizing that they are angels or simply removes the normal terror associated with them. They speak to her with great compassion “Woman why are you crying?” And she responds, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary is totally focused on the fact that Jesus’ body is missing and this gives the angels the perfect opportunity to proclaim the good news of the resurrection but instead Jesus appears. For some reason Mary turns around, possibly because she hears a noise or sees an expression of awe on the faces of the
angels or maybe she senses a familiar presence and responds. At this point she doesn't recognize Jesus and there are many explanations that have been suggested but I believe that Jesus did not want her to recognize him just yet possibly for the same reason that the two men on the road to Emmaus were not allowed to recognize Jesus in Luke 24. Jesus asks the same question as the angels but he enquires even further, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” It’s important to realize that John records the first thing that Jesus says after the resurrection is “Whom are you seeking” which echoes the first thing that Jesus speaks in John’s Gospel in 1:38, when two of John the Baptist’ disciples are following him he asked them, “What are you seeking?” That is the question before us this morning; who or what are you seeking but we’ll return to that later.

Mary assumes that he is the gardener and says to him,

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Jesus chooses to come to Mary with such love and tenderness. This woman who had been an outcast but then had been changed by the power and love of Jesus is the first one to see the resurrected Lord. The good news is not just that Jesus has resurrected from the dead but that the character of God is revealed in Him. Mary is the first to finally see Jesus for who he really is and she cries out “Rabboni! (teacher) and then embraces him out of joy and utter relief. Can you imagine what that moment was like for her? He had once set her free from the darkness of demonic possession but now he sets her free from despair to truly experience life as it was intended, in relationship with the God who had loved her so completely. Everything was now made new. Seeing the grave clothes and the angels and even Jesus standing in front of her had not been enough to pierce the despair and darkness but when Jesus calls her name, she knows his voice because she is a true sheep. Jesus had taught them in John 10:3–4 that he was the Good Shepherd and His sheep knew his voice. Jesus calls her by the name that he had used before and she responds with the name that she used for him, Rabboni. Of course her response indicates that she assumes that things will now return to where they were before but Jesus let’s
her know that things were very different—as was the relationship that he will have with his followers.

Let’s read John 20:17–18,

> Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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.’”  

> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

Mary’s response is probably the same response that most people would have and some have felt that Jesus’ reply was a bit short. There are other examples of Jesus allowing people to touch him before his ascension to the Father. I think that Jesus knows her deepest thoughts and the longing of her heart and he knew that she was clinging to him out of a desire to keep him there forever. That’s why he says to her, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ He is basically saying to her, “Mary, I am alive but remember how I taught you that I would ascend back to my Father and I would send back another comforter, the Holy Spirit?

John Calvin wrote:

> We should notice this reason which he adds, for by these words he showed the purpose of his resurrection. It was not what they had imagined — that he would return to life and then triumph in the world — but rather, by his ascension to heaven he would take possession of the kingdom which had been promised to him and, seated at the Father’s right hand, would govern the church by the power of his Spirit. The words therefore mean that the state of his resurrection would not be full and complete in every respect until he sat down in heaven at the Father’s right hand; and therefore the women were wrong to be content with having nothing more than half of his resurrection and wanting to enjoy his presence in the world.

Again, the natural response of Mary is to want Jesus to stay and fulfill his plans right there and then. Jesus wants her and all of his children to come into a
fullness of relationship that would be coming on the day of Pentecost and for that to happen he would go back to the Father and send the Holy Spirit. For now she is to go "to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Dr. Rod Whitaker in his commentary on John writes, “She has just found him, and now she is sent away, but she is sent with a commission. As the ancient church put it, she becomes an apostle to the apostles. The message she is given says a great deal about the new phase that has begun in the relations between the Father, the Son and the disciples. Indications of change begin with the commission itself: Go instead to my brothers and tell them (v. 17). This is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus refers to his disciples as his brothers. This implies not only that Jesus has not put off his humanity in his resurrected state (Alford 1980:980), but that he has inaugurated a new level of intimacy between himself and his disciples. The new community he founded during his ministry became a new family at the cross (19:26–27), and now the disciples are to enter into this new form of relationship.

This new relationship is expressed in the message Mary is to convey: tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (v. 17). It is perhaps surprising that his first message is not "I have risen from the dead." He does not focus on himself but instead focuses on himself in relation to his Father. Jesus had spoken of his going to the Father, both in his general teaching (7:33–36) and in the farewell discourse to his disciples (13:3; 14:2–4, 12, 28; 16:5, 10, 17, 28). The Father is his center of reference, and to return to him is his greatest joy and therefore the joy of his disciples (14:28). So the message “I am returning to my Father” expresses Jesus' great delight. He has finished the work (19:30) and can now return to the Father. This isn’t the end of Jesus work on behalf of the disciples but merely the inauguration of a new phase where they will be endued with the same power that brought about the resurrection and Pentecost would be the sign of the kingdom of God coming to Earth in power.

In closing I want to go back for a moment to the question that Jesus asked Mary, “Whom are you seeking?” As was pointed out earlier that was the first question in the Gospel of John and the first question that Jesus spoke after his
resurrection as well. That is the most important question for us this morning as too.

Mary’s response to the realization of Jesus’ presence showed that he was exactly who she had longed for and His appearance changed everything in her life both then and for eternity. Perhaps some of you here this morning have lost the joy that you once knew when you first encountered the living Christ. Remember what it was like when you first met him? Do you still have that joy? If not could it be that you have not been seeking Him above all things?

Maybe there are some here this morning that have never encountered the living Jesus or have never heard His voice as Mary did on that first Easter morning. He is calling you, are you listening for His voice or are you seeking salvation down some other path that will only lead to frustration and despair?

This morning the Lord is calling each of us to encounter Him possibly for the first time. For those who have given their lives to him we will seek renewal by recommitting ourselves through the vows that we made at our baptism. Let’s pray...

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