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A Sermon for Easter Day

Colossians 3:1-4 &

St. John 20:1-10

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St. John writes in today's Gospel:

**Now on the first day of the week
Mary Magdalene came to the tomb
early, while it was still dark...**

John is a brilliant story-teller and he's a brilliant story-teller because he knew the story so well. Not just the story he tells of his time with Jesus, but the whole story, the big story of God and Israel—a story that leads straight to Jesus. But, even more, John knew that the story of God and Israel was even bigger. It was part of a story that involves the whole human race and all of creation. And so there are echoes here in his Gospel—deliberate echoes—that recall that big story, of Israel and Israel's God, of his beloved creation that our fallen race has corrupted, and the story of his love, his mercy, and his grace that are at work to set it to rights.

Mary went to the tomb while it was still dark. Jesus had been crucified. He was dead. End of story. Jerusalem was ready to carry on with life as usual. If they'd had water coolers in the First Century, the events of that Passover might have been the topic of discussion that first day back to work. But it was over. Or so everyone thought. But while Jerusalem slept, Mary went to the tomb. John writes specifically that it was the first day of the week. He didn't need to tell us that. Jesus' body wasn't placed in the tomb until late on Friday. Saturday, well, that was the sabbath. No one would go to the tomb on the sabbath. So we'd know it was the first day of the week, Sunday. But John tells us

anyway and he tells us in such a way to remind us of the opening words of his Gospel: "In the beginning..." You know those words. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God."

But when John wrote those words, he chose them carefully, because in introducing Jesus, he wanted to remind us of another beginning. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". He tells us that Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark. Again, remember the first words of Genesis, the very beginning of the story: "The earth was without form and void, and *darkness* was over the face of the deep." As John opened his Gospel with words suggesting that the story of Jesus is going to be a story of new creation, so even as he tells us about Jesus' resurrection, he again frames it in terms of new creation, filling his story with echoes of Genesis. John writes that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. On the sixth day, Pilate presented Jesus to the people and announced, "Behold the man!" Hanging on the cross, Jesus used his last gasp of breath to declare, "It is finished." Again, an echo of Genesis. Any normal person who counted himself a friend of Jesus would have considered that first Good Friday a very, very bad day, but that echo from Genesis reverberates through John's account. When God had finished the work of creation he declared that it was all very good. Jesus was laid to rest in the tomb for the sabbath—another echo of Genesis. Death is not the end, but the beginning of new creation. As Mary went to the tomb that first Easter morning, the first day of the week, the word of God was poised to burst forth in an act of new creation.

At the time no one understood any of this. Mary went to the tomb expecting that, like every other person in history who has died, Jesus would still be there, stone cold and lifeless. She went to mourn and to meet her friends to finish the work of anointing Jesus' body. She found the tomb was open,

the great stone door rolled away. It was dark, so there was no point poking inside for a look. But that didn't matter. The open tomb meant only one thing: Jesus' body was gone. John doesn't reveal Mary's thoughts, but resurrection would have been the last thing on her mind. No, the open tomb meant someone had taken the body, maybe grave robbers, maybe Roman soldiers playing a joke on some silly Jews, adding insult to injury. So she ran. She ran to Peter's hiding place in the city and beat on the door. Peter went running with John to the tomb. John's the one who describes himself as the one whom Jesus loved.

John tells us that he outran Peter and got to the tomb first. The sun was rising and as he peered into the tomb he saw the linen strips that had wrapped Jesus' body. That was an odd thing. Mary, John, and Peter could think of a few reasons why someone might have taken Jesus' body, but that anyone would first unwrap him was inexplicable. Peter arrived and headed straight into the tomb. If Jesus' tomb was like others that have been found, his body was likely placed on a shelf to one side of the small, low entrance. If his head had been oriented towards the door, it would have been difficult to see without at least putting head and shoulders into the tomb as Peter did. And what a curious thing Peter found. Not only was the body gone with the wrappings left behind, but the wrappings appeared to be undisturbed, as if Jesus had simply passed right through them. And the cloth that had been on his head, probably a piece of linen tied around the head to keep the jaw closed, it had been moved and neatly placed nearby.

For comparison, it hadn't been that long before that Jesus had raised Lazarus from death. The disciples had watched as Lazarus stumbled out of his tomb. He was still tightly wrapped in linen, probably not unlike a Hollywood mummy. His friends scrambled to tear the linen cloths away, making a mess in the process.

Lazarus was all sticky and oily from the various liquids used to anoint his dead body. In contrast, everything about Jesus' tomb spoke of calm and order, even the face covering was neatly set aside.

John tells us that at this point he squeezed into the tomb beside Peter. He saw and believed, he writes. But believed what? John goes on to tell us in the next verse that "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." *They* did not yet understand, but *he* believed. Some argue that John merely believed Mary's report of the missing body, but this seems like a pretty trite detail in amongst everything else John has told us here. Peter and Mary believed Jesus' body was really gone, too. What would seem to make the best sense of this passage is to understand that John is saying that this was the moment when he realised that Jesus had been raised from death. He said nothing to Peter or to Mary. He and Peter returned home. Mary remained at the tomb weeping. They, the others, didn't know what to make of the missing body, because they did not yet understand the implication of either Jesus' claims or of the scriptures. But John was beginning to put two and two together—and he believed.

You can't really blame John for not saying anything. He, himself, must have been struggling to understand and to make sense of it all. But there it was. The tomb was empty. I expect John ran through the handful of reasons that the body might be gone and realised that none of them really made that much sense. The Romans had no reason to take it. Neither did the Jewish authorities—especially after they'd released Jesus' body to his friends for burial. Grave robbers? What would they want with a poor man's grave? And the empty, but undisturbed linens? Who in their right mind would unwrap the body? Suddenly all the things Jesus had said, things like his statement that he would tear down the temple and rebuild it in

three days, it started to come together and to make sense. John's brain started reaching back into the scriptures that he thought he knew so well, and new connections started to form. He started hearing those old words afresh in light of Jesus—and especially the empty tomb. And he began to understand.

I think that, again, the contrast with Lazarus must have stood out. John had seen a sort of resurrection before, but Lazarus was resurrected to a life still subject to death and decay and emerged from the tomb still wrapped in his graveclothes. Something different had happened to Jesus. The undisturbed graveclothes spoke of something greater. Resurrection—something God's people longed for—had happened, but not as expected. Resurrection was supposed to happen to everyone all at once at the end of the age, but—what if, John started to think—Jesus was raised first—raised to inaugurate and to lead the way into the age to come. And that meant that Jesus really was the Messiah and that somehow this meant that God really was going to set everything to rights. New creation had begun that morning, but it would take some time—and a meeting with the risen Jesus—before John would be able to sort out for himself what it all meant.

But if new creation was born that morning, it also had to have implications not only for Jesus, but for his people too. John doesn't elaborate at this point. The wheels in his head, after all, were just starting to turn. But that's where St. Paul and our Epistle pick up, written decades later after he and so many other had had the time to think it through and work it out—rethinking everything they'd ever known in light of the risen Jesus. Let me read those four verses from Colossians again. Colossians 3:1-4.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds

on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

What are the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for his people? St. Paul wrote Colossians, at least in part, to address what seems to have been a common problem in the New Testament churches: legalism. Jewish Christians struggled with the place of the law in the new covenant and many gentile believers were told that they needed first to embrace a form of Judaism before they could really be followers of Jesus. In Colossians 2:20-23 Paul asks such people why they continue to live as if they were still enslaved by that old way of life. Sure, the law has "an appearance of wisdom" in helping a person to attain an outward appearance of piety, but that's just it: it's an outward appearance, an outward conformity to holiness. It's not that this is necessarily a bad thing in itself, but that true holiness is something that wells up out of the heart—or, at least, it should. It's not hard to hear Paul's frustration in these words. Jewish converts should know better. This had been Israel's struggle since the beginning and Jesus, in his death and resurrection, had finally fixed it. Jesus gives his people new life by giving us new hearts—turning them away from sin and self and rebellion and back to God. But it's easy to talk about the new life Jesus gives. It's often a struggle to actually live it. New life is the starting point when it comes to defeating sin, but all too often we forget and start thinking that new life is the result of first having tackled sin ourselves. Paul knew all too well that's not how the gospel works.

Jesus has led us in an exodus from sin and death. In his resurrection he has given us new life. We are no longer slaves. This is the basic truth of the Christian life and if we don't get this right, we'll get everything else wrong.

As the Lord led the Israelites out of Egypt through the sea and freed them from their bondage to Pharaoh, Jesus sets us free from sin's bondage when we pass through the waters of baptism. It's a truth. A fact. A done deal. *We have been redeemed.* Even if we don't feel it, Jesus and the Spirit have transformed us: we *were* slaves to sin and death and *now* we are free; we *were* in bondage to the world and are *now* citizens of the kingdom of heaven. This is what we mean when we speak of "regeneration". This is what Paul gets at in our Epistle. He writes in 2:20 that we have died with the Messiah and now he writes in 3:1 that we have also been raised with the Messiah. Again, we may not feel it, but if we have truly taken hold of Jesus in faith, he has carried us through death and out the other side into a new kind of life. What he did for the Israelites when he delivered them from their Egyptian slavery through the waters of the Red Sea he has just as surely done for us in delivering us from sin and death through the waters of baptism. It's a done deal. It's a sure thing.

And yet, there's more to come. What we have today in the Spirit is the down payment of the life that awaits us the other side of resurrection. What Paul is saying here is one of those "already-but-no-yet" truths. Jesus has been raised to the sort of real life and true humanity that we lost through our sin. We look forward in faith and hope to the day when we will be raised as he was, but in the meantime we have God's own Spirit living in us as an earnest on that day. We await the resurrection, but even today the Spirit makes that future resurrection a reality for us. Maybe this is what makes life in Jesus a struggle. If we could appear in locked rooms and never know sickness or decay again—as is true of Jesus—it would be easier to remember who and what we are. Instead, we are called today to live by faith, not by sight. One day the promise will be fulfilled. One day the things of the present age will be gone for good and

God's new age will come in all its fullness, heaven will descend to earth and man will live with God. But until then we have God's promise and we have his Spirit and we have the empty tomb to remind us that our hope is sure and certain.

And so we begin with first principles: If we have died with the Messiah, we have been raised with the Messiah. We need to get this truth into our heads and when we do, we'll remember that our life and everything about it that matters, is in the heavenlies where Jesus sits at the right hand of God. Our true lives are hidden there with Jesus, Paul says. It's a kind of mystery, this "already-but-not-yet" life we have in the Messiah. But even though it's stored away in the heavenlies along with the rest of the age to come and God's new world, Paul wants us to understand that it's still very much who and what we are right now. The new age dawned that first Easter morning when Jesus rose triumphant over death and if we are in him by faith, we really are part of that new age. It may be hidden from the world around us, but it's not hidden from us, because Jesus and the Spirit have made it our reality. We live today in faith-filled hope and in hope-filled anticipation of the day when Jesus returns to rejoin heaven and earth, God and humanity, and to bring the new age in all its fullness. And as difficult as it may be some days to live this reality, Paul urges us to do so in faith-filled hope, knowing that Jesus, who is our life, will return to finish what he has started. On that day we will know glory in all its fullness. Our hope is not merely that Jesus will return, but also that when he returns he will reveal who we really are in him. Resurrection will vindicate and reveal the faithfulness of God's people, just as Jesus was vindicated and glorified in his resurrection. As we struggle against sin and as we labour for God's kingdom we may feel inadequate or insignificant, but the resurrection of Jesus ought to be a source of

encouragement to live the truth of who we are in Jesus even as some aspects of it are still hidden with him. Now, back to our Gospel: St. John reminds us of those words "In the beginning..." The story has begun. Now we wait for the end. But we await the ending in hopeful anticipation, because what our God has begun, what our God has so invested with his love and with the sacrifice of his own Son, our God will surely finish. Brothers and Sisters, glory awaits.

Let's pray: Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant us by your grace to set our minds on things above; that by your continual help our lives may be transformed; through the same, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*