

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Life, death, and resurrection is the theme of these Great Three Days that culminates tonight in our celebration of Easter. We have moved from life, through death, to new life in Christ's rising from the dead.

Last night I asked about what it took to kill Jesus, and we discovered that it took a whole host of people acting together out of fear, resentment, disappointment, and complacency. Tonight I want us to consider what it took for the disciples to believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Tonight we read the resurrection account from John's Gospel. Tomorrow morning we'll read from Luke. And the details are a little different. In both accounts, Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus in the tomb, but in John's Gospel the friendly Pharisee Nicodemus helps him, and they are the ones who put the spices on the body, not the women. So it's not clear in John why Mary Magdalene is at the tomb before dark on Sunday morning.

But whatever the reason, there she is. She sees that the tomb has been opened, and immediately she runs back to the disciples with the news. Mary is sometimes called the first evangelist or the "apostle to the apostles" because she was the first witness of the resurrection and the first to proclaim it to others. I think it is good and right to give her that honor. But with very great respect to Mary, her first attempt was, to put it bluntly, a failure, and she became a purveyor of "fake news." "They have taken his body!" she tells the disciples, and two of them, Peter and probably John, run to the tomb. They go in one at a time and see that the body is missing. Then, after the second disciple goes in, John tells us, "he saw and believed." But what did he believe? That Jesus was risen? No! John is careful to tell us that they didn't understand that yet. What he believed was Mary's false report, that someone had taken Jesus' body. What he believed, what they all believed, was that death has the last word, that dead bodies stay dead and then decompose. If a body is not where it was buried, that means *somebody* moved it. So what did it take to believe that Jesus had risen? Not an empty tomb.

The two disciples then go back home. I guess they didn't know what else to do. Someone has added insult to injury. Not only was their teacher and friend killed, but his grave was desecrated. What else could they do?

But Mary stays at the tomb, in deep mourning. Only this time she goes into the tomb. Now the tomb is no longer empty. Now there are two angels, who seem just as surprised as she is. They ask her why she's crying. "Because someone has taken his body," she answers, still convinced of her false assumption. What does it take to believe that Jesus has risen? Not a vision of angels, apparently.

Then Mary turns around and bumps right into Jesus himself, right there in the flesh. But she doesn't recognize him. Did she have trouble seeing through all her tears? Had Jesus changed his appearance? Why doesn't she recognize him? We don't know. What does it take to believe that Jesus has risen? Astonishingly, not even a personal appearance by Jesus in the flesh!

Jesus too seems a little perplexed by Mary's response. "Why are you weeping?" He repeats the angels' question. Maybe his question had the sense of "Why on earth are you weeping? Can't you see it's me?" What does it take to believe that Jesus has risen? Not even the Jesus in the flesh standing right in front of you and speaking to you!

What finally does it, what finally breaks through all her assumptions, what finally upends her conviction in the brutal finality of death, and opens her eyes and heart to the resurrection is Jesus speaking her name. “Mary!” With that one word, her own name, the spell is broken. In that instant, faith takes hold and she is transformed. Now she truly becomes the first evangelist, the apostle to the apostle. She goes back to the disciples no longer in a panic, no longer bewildered and confused. Now she is a woman on a mission, able to proclaim to without reservation, “I have seen the Lord.”

So that’s what it took for Mary to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and through the lens of that conviction to make sense of everything that came before and that would come next. It took Jesus speaking her name.

What, then, does it take for us? Could it possibly be the very same thing? A little while ago we gathered around the baptismal font and affirmed our own baptism. We remembered that in Holy Baptism we were called *by name* into the body of Christ, the church. By the power of the Holy Spirit called down upon us in baptism we have been given eyes to see Christ’s resurrection, ears to hear the word of God proclaimed and embodied by the people of God, and hearts to trust in the promises of life made to us because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Called by name in Holy Baptism into a living, loving relationship with God, everything in our past, present, and future is given a new meaning, and we like our sister Mary can proclaim with our lips and with our lives that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)