

The Vigil of Easter – April 19, 2025
John 20:1-18

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Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!) Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Life, death, and now resurrection. The Great Three Days have brought us at last to our goal. And tonight we have had a chance to place that movement from life, through death, and now to resurrection life in its proper context of the entirety of cosmic history. We began this evening with light, the light of the new fire evoking God's new creation that began in Jesus' tomb. We carried that light into our darkened sanctuary, sharing it among ourselves, and then we held onto that light, each on our separate candles, through some of the formative stories of the faith, and a reaffirmation of our baptisms, until at last we arrive at this first feast of the Resurrection, and this final reading from the Gospel according to John.

We don't always use John for our Gospel reading at the Vigil. It is more traditionally connected with Easter morning. But it is such a good fit here, and I want you to appreciate just how that is so. First, I want us to notice that Mary comes to Jesus' tomb while it was still dark. This is not merely chronological information. Darkness and light is a central theme of John's account. John begins his Gospel with a retelling of the creation story from Genesis that was our very first reading tonight. That account begins in darkness, and the very first thing God does is to call light into being. John's retelling begins with the Word, the Word that is *with* God from the very beginning, the Word that *is* God. That Word, John goes on to say, is light, the light that enlightens all people, the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. John then returns to this theme again and again throughout his Gospel, from the nighttime encounter with Nicodemus, through the healing of the man born blind, to this resurrection story.

So Mary comes to the tomb "in the dark" and gets enlightened. This is more than merely acquiring new information. Jesus' presence in the garden with her creates a new reality. And the garden, of course, is another reference to creation, this time the second creation story. Mary's world, which had been utterly shattered by Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, is now put back together. But it's a process. It takes a while for the impossible reality of it all to sink in. When she first is confronted by the empty tomb she does not even consider the possibility that Jesus could be raised. Of course she doesn't. And that leads her to jump to the wrong conclusion when she runs to tell the disciples. "*They* have taken the Lord..." Peter and the other disciples run to the tomb in disbelief. They don't believe Mary. Women were thought to be unreliable witnesses in this culture. When they get to the tomb, though, they see what she saw, and only then did they believe her. But John wants us to know that they did *not* yet believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. How could they? The men go back home, but Mary stays at the tomb. And now she is encountered by Jesus. But again, it takes her time to realize this. A risen Jesus doesn't fit the imaginable options. Instead she supposes him to be the gardener. But then Jesus calls her by name and her new reality is comes into being. And that is our first takeaway. Jesus encountering us in word and sacrament, the stuff of creation, brings about a new reality in our lives, in fact a new creation.

The second thing to notice is what happens next. We infer from the story that Mary gave Jesus a big hug, or something like that. Maybe she grabbed his arm or his hands. Whatever it is, clearly she is overjoyed that he is alive and she does what anyone would do in that situation. She wants to hold onto him and never let him go. But Jesus will not let her hold onto him. Not in this way. "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father," he tells her. Which is a little odd, don't you think? How can she "hold onto him" if he ascends to the Father? It's

what he says next that points to the answer, I think. “Go and tell my brothers, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father...” Jesus will not allow Mary’s relationship with him to be private. Jesus wants her to hold on to him only in the community of the faithful, because faith is not, and cannot be only a private matter. It is something that is meant to be shared, nurtured, and strengthened in community. That’s our second takeaway.

Third, Mary becomes the first apostle when she is sent by Jesus with the message of his resurrection. As one famous modern theologian has observed, “Without women preachers we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.” Remember that the next time someone tells you that women shouldn’t be pastors. I will be remembering that with joy next Saturday when I join the livestream of the first ordination of women in the Lutheran Church of Australia. What I want you to see, though, is the difference between what Mary says this time as compared with what she said the first time. This time she does not jump to conclusions. She sticks to what she knows and has experienced. “I have seen the Lord.” And presumably she also relays the message that Jesus sent her with. So the third takeaway is this. We do not have to know everything and we do not have to be religious experts in order to proclaim the gospel. All we need to do is convey the promises of God’s love, forgiveness, and resurrection life that we have been encountered by in our own lies of faith.

Those three things are our takeaways tonight: Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!) Christ is risen indeed and a new creation has begun. Christ is risen indeed and we share in his resurrection life in communities of faith, where Christ the Word continues to encounter us. Christ is risen indeed and we are, all of us, authorized and empowered to share that faith with the world and with generations yet to come. Christ is risen indeed, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.