

Easter Sunday: Faith Resurrected

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One morning a month or so ago, I got up, went for a 5am run in the dark, came home, took a shower, packed lunches for Eli and I, ate some breakfast, told Eli goodbye, and Steph paused her morning routine long enough for a goodbye hug and a kiss. I picked up my lunch box and backpack and water bottle and yep, got my phone, yes, my hearing aids are in my ears and headed toward the door that leads to the garage. My last step in my morning leaving the house and heading off to work routine is usually to reach up on top of the storage cabinet that sits by the door to grab my billfold. And it wasn't there.

You know how spatial memory works; my hand went there where there would be billfold, and there was no billfold. Maybe it's on top of my side of the dresser. I set all my stuff back down and went to look. Nope. Maybe it's in the plastic box in my socks and underwear drawer where I used to throw all of the bolts and nuts and cotter pins, tools, small electrical connectors and other random crap I used to bring home in my pockets when I still worked as a combine repair technician. Nope. Not there. It must be in the car. I probably hadn't stuck it back in my rear pocket after I had filled up with gas the day before. So I picked up all the rest of my stuff and headed to the garage.

I opened up the passenger door of my old honda civic and threw all my stuff in the passenger seat. But I didn't see my billfold where I would have typically set it next to the gearshifter on the console. I ran around to the driver's side, feeling a little prickle of panic at the thought of having done something dumb like leave it sitting on the car trunk or the roof or the gas pump and maybe its sitting alongside the road somewhere or someone picked it up and is right now draining my checking account by ordering stuff online with my debit card or stealing my identity with my Driver's License. I looked around desperately beside the seat and under the seat and in the console and nope, nope, nope and the feelings of something akin to panic growing larger.

Have you ever had an experience of being shaken up when something valuable was not where you expected it to be? On that first Easter morning there was a lot that was not where it was expected to be!

On that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene gets up early, while it was still dark and heads to the garden tomb where Jesus' dead, cold body had been placed the day before.

Alone.

Mathew's gospel says it's she and the other Mary. Mark says she goes with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. Luke just says "the women". But in John's gospel, it's *just* Mary Magdalene. Also note-worthy is the fact that Mary Magdalene is the only one whom all 4 gospels name as there at the tomb on that first Easter morning. Clearly, aside from Jesus himself, Mary Magdalene is the central figure of the resurrection discovery narrative.

Now, I don't know about you, but if I imagine going alone, in the dark, through a cemetery to visit a fresh tomb—it makes my scalp tingle.

I had a scalp tingling experience here at church about a week and a half ago. I had discovered a file in my church office file cabinet back in January with "Woman in Wedding Dress" written on the tab. Pastor Steve Schmidt had put a file together and left it there for future pastors to know the facts associated. I read through those notes and email conversations and interviews and obituary of the legendary Martha Schmidt who died at age 25 and was buried in her wedding dress as she had requested before she died just before her wedding. The account of her paranormal appearance at Alexanderwohl occurred when the building was being worked on, when carpet was being installed. Well, our building was being worked on again last week! So one morning last week I got here early and just for kicks and giggles decided to take a walk down to the foundation room. I tend to be pretty skeptical about these sorts of paranormal things, and I still am. And no, I didn't see Martha. But let me tell you, my scalp was feeling kinda tingly as I walked down those stairs into that dark foundation room just to take a look.

But Mary Magdalene, if she's fearful of this scenario, we certainly aren't told about it. Granted, their culture was much more acquainted with death and handling and preparing dead bodies than we are—we pay morticians to do that in our culture. But Mary, she's steadfast in her devotion to Jesus, and we get no sense in John's gospel of her being fearful in this entire Easter morning episode.

The song I chose “I come to the garden alone” that is clearly inspired by this passage does kind of sentimentalize this garden experience just a bit. Just a couple days earlier she had witnessed the trauma of her beloved friend tortured and publicly murdered not far from the garden.

What would possibly have motivated her to get up early that morning in the dark and go to this place?

Those of us who are familiar with the resurrection story will easily assume she was going to anoint his body for burial, because that *is* the case in the other gospels. But John tells us the ritual washing and anointing and wrapping with the use of 75 lbs of myrrh and aloe, has already been done by Joseph of Aramethea and none other than Nicodemus (remember Nic who comes at night? Nic at night?). That’s right, Nicodemus who appears in the middle of the night in chapter 3 to talk with Jesus and then disappears—walks back out of the shadows again just before this passage to assist Joseph of Aramethea in taking Jesus' dead body down from the cross and preparing him for burial. They place Jesus' body in a tomb in a garden close to the place called the Skull. A large stone is placed over the entrance.

All the prep work has been done. The stone has been set in place. So why did she go there? Let’s continue with the passage.

Verse one says simply, early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She sees that the stone has been moved and concludes that his body had been stolen or taken away. And she runs to tell Peter and the other Disciple as much. How did she conclude his body was gone? Did she look in and see the graveclothes? We aren’t told. My hunch is she did. How else would she have concluded the tomb was empty just by seeing the stone was moved away? But great discoveries in patriarchal society usually get attributed to men, not women, so..

When she tells Peter and the other disciple, I imagine them locking eyes for a few seconds and then both at the same time jump up and footrace it to the tomb to see for themselves. Sure enough, his body is gone! We aren’t told what Peter’s reaction is other than he ran straight into the tomb and we’re told that the

other disciple then followed, saw and believed. Exactly what he believed we aren't told. Commentators have suggested that it simply means that he believed Mary M's account that his body is no longer there. They head back home to the place they were staying in Jerusalem.

But not Mary Magdalene! After seeing the tomb no longer contained a body and having run and told the disciples, *again* finds herself at the empty tomb.

Was it to make sure she was remembering correctly the harrowing trauma of the days before? Jesus, her friend and teacher really was dead. Was all of this just a bad, illogical dream that has just gotten worse, now that even his body is gone? Was she motivated by feelings of desperation that she had lost something valuable, like me losing my billfold?

Was it that her love for her teacher and Rabbi was so strong that she didn't know what else to do? And that was the last place she'd seen him or his body. Maybe some of all of that.

Maybe we can understand some of her motive by simply asking ourselves, why do we visit grave sites?

Think about the last time you visited a cemetery. Why did you go there? To remember, right? And to slowly find healing that enables us to keep going with our lives—but keeps the memories very much alive! In a word, we go to the garden to grieve.

And that, it seems, is why and where we find Mary in the garden outside the tomb, weeping. Loss upon loss, now even his body is gone, somewhere. Her early morning vigilance, as writer Stephanie Duncan Smith writes about is a “holding in tension two dramatically different outcomes—one of life and one that ends in death—knowing there is nothing she can do to control which way the story tilts....”

The sobs bring her to her knees and she looks again into that deserted tomb, but now sees two angels dressed in white sitting there one at the head and one at the foot of the stone bed where Jesus body had been, some say reminiscent of the angels on the covering of the ark of the covenant that was placed on the Holy of Holies of the Temple after all those wilderness wanderings, the place between the wing tips where God's presence was said to most fully dwell. Jesus has

referred to himself and his body as the new temple. The angels symbolize the crucified and risen Christ has BECOME the Holy of Holies. The place, or being, where God most fully dwells...

One of the angels says to her “Woman, why are you crying?”
 “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have put him.”
 Usually when angels appear in the Bible they are there to proclaim something. But not this time. That decisive revelation will come from Jesus himself. Commentator Brian Peterson suggests the angels are present here, it seems, only to allow Mary an opportunity to express her loss and confusion. What happened? Why are you upset. Tell me what’s behind those tears. What did you see? Put it into words. What trauma counselors call debriefing.

She turns and sees a man standing there who she thinks is the caretaker of the garden whom John has already been told is Jesus. In the Anabaptist community Bible there is a piece of artwork on the page across from this that shows Jesus standing in the shrubs with a garden spade. “Woman, why are you crying? *Who* are you looking for?”

Sir, she says, “If you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her “Mary”. At the sound of her name, she recognizes him. The familiar sound of his voice, saying her name. This grieving, traumatized, exasperated human being hears not only her name, but no doubt his words “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and call them each by name. I will never leave them, even in the darkest night. I’m *right here!*”

She turns to him and says in Aramaic “Rabbouni” which means not just teacher, but “beloved teacher”. She rushes to him and throws her arms around him and holds him. Many Bible scholars agree that Jesus response of “don’t hold on to me because I have not yet returned to the Father” really should be interpreted as “don’t *keep* holding on to me” because he’s got some where he needs to be.

Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them “I’m going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. And announce it she does. “I have seen the Lord!” Oh, she will have a lot of trauma and grief to work through still, and her

proclamation of “I have seen the Lord” will keep unfolding and growing and shaping and forming her life..but she has received it wholeheartedly.

What’s a good takeaway from this Resurrection narrative on this Easter Sunday 2026? What’s the nugget here?

Pastor Anita Kehr who was my pastor at FMC in Newton for a long time, would often say as she neared the end of the sermon “here’s the thing...” meaning, “here comes the take-away”. If you had fallen asleep or your mind had drifted off, at least catch this key truth to hang on to from this passage..

So, here’s the thing. You ready for it?

Faith, that I will describe here as hope and trust that good comes out of bad, that new life comes through and beyond death, that joy and justice and love are *victorious* in the end—when new faith breaks into our lives it *comes as a gift*. Not a conclusion we reach after we examine the evidence. Not by trying to increase our belief. Not by “believing harder”. Not by disciplining ourselves to read our Bible more diligently, or participating in more things at church, or by building more houses for MDS or by advocating for social justice causes. All of those are wonderful and very important and necessary manifestations of our faith as we strive to co-create a more just and kind world for all people everywhere. But when we experience a movement in our journey of life and faith, when we find new ways to hold our beliefs, our longings and even our doubt, this is *nothing but a pure gift of God!*

Often, these moments are gifted to us during the hardest moments of our lives. In our grief. In our loss. In our illness. Our confusion, our pain. Maybe sometimes at moments of elation and joy...holding a newborn child, for example. Or maybe sometimes in the midst of the ordinary.

My billfold? After pacing around the house for a while looking in random places where my billfold could be, I suddenly discovered my billfold was in my rear right pocket already. My tightly held expectation that it would be in its place on top of the cabinet was so strong that I failed to feel the slight pressure on my right butt cheek that would have told me that my billfold was there, and had been there all along.

And isn't that how newfound faith breaks into our lives? Faith, belief and trust in existential goodness and love, and that underlying all existence is an undercurrent of love that *knows our name*...Has been right there in our back pocket all along.

May we, like Mary Magdalene, receive those beautiful gifts of faith when they come, new ways of holding your beliefs, experiences and doubts and questions.

Mary Magdalene, in that early morning vigil, ***received the most beautiful gift of all***—the revelation that love is stronger than death. Her friend Jesus who walked the way of death with love, and what it became was not death or the end, but new Life! Death has been defeated, and all that dies will be reborn!

Will you receive this Easter gift?

Thank you, O God, for the gift of faith through your son Jesus. Thank you for the gift of ever growing, ever moving and expanding faith in the never-ending power of goodness and love. May we hear your voice speaking the sound of our name, and receive the gift of life eternal in the here and now, and in the life to come! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Amen? Amen