

EASTER SUNDAY 2021

John 20:1—9

Three Easter stories are read in our assemblies this weekend. At the Vigil we hear of three women—Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome—who arrive at the tomb to encounter a heavenly messenger. He proclaims to them that Jesus is raised from the dead and urges them to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee.

Today's gospel from John offers another version. Mary Magdalene alone discovers the empty tomb and must interpret these events personally. So, must Peter and another disciple, called the Beloved," who stands in for us.

Mary Magdalene is the first; we read only the first half of her story, but we notice how her faith is at an early stage. Her devotion brought her to the tomb, but the missing body can only mean that someone has taken it away. Jesus himself will have to search her out to bring her to full belief.

The second is Peter. At the end of the discourse on the Bread of Life, he made an impressive personal commitment to Jesus, but later denied three times that he even knew him. So wounded was he spiritually by these denials that even though he saw the grave clothes lying there, he could not conclude to the truth.

The third disciple is not named, but he has already appeared at the side of Jesus at the supper and was present at the foot of the cross. He enjoyed this intimacy with Jesus because he already had the right relationship with him, that of mutual love. For this reason, he could run faster than Peter and he drew the correct conclusion from the grave clothes which he saw in the tomb. He himself a model believer, he became not only the authority for his community for the material contained in this gospel, but an example to them. They were to believe as he believed; their relationship to Jesus was to be that of friends, not servants.

The question of his identity is still debated, but this is of small importance compared with his significance. Usually, he is identified with John. He represents all faithful disciples of Jesus through all ages of the church. Their loving intimacy with Jesus ensures that though they do not see Jesus physically, they believe without seeing.

I remember the first time I wondered about what John saw that convinced him that Jesus had risen from the dead and that his body had not been stolen. In the seminary I had the chance to ask one of my teachers, who was an excellent New Testament scholar, especially in Johannine writings, what is with the burial clothes? He said that this was probably more a question of the visual evidence before him rather than anything theological.

John probably thought that a grave thief would be more interested in what is buried with the corpse. If they were interested in stealing a corpse, they certainly would not carry it in the middle of the night naked. The thief could have brought their own cover, but the fact that **face cloth** was removed also eliminated the fact that the body was stolen. No thief would have removed the face cloth, which was a rolled-up cloth designed to wrap around the chin and tied at the top of the head to keep the mouth closed and decomposing odors of the body from escaping through the mouth.

In that instant John knew that Jesus had risen.

The question now is, do we believe? Because if we do, will we show it through **how** we act, speak, think, and treat others. We will show it through the songs we listen to, or sing. We will show it in what passes through our eyes and into our souls by what we look at, like art and images, landscapes, and views of nature, each other. **How** we believe will come out in what we say to each other and what we write, in what we read to fill our heads, especially the Scriptures and the Classical Spiritual Writings? What we believe in will come out in how we live our lives simply so that others can simply live?

In the end, how we live in our belief is what will attract others to Jesus.