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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## LONG DAYS and NIGHTS

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ APRIL 16, 2017

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**E**arly on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. <sup>2</sup>She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, “They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

<sup>3</sup>Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. <sup>4</sup>They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn’t go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. <sup>8</sup>Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed— <sup>9</sup>for until then they still hadn’t understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then they went home.

<sup>11</sup>Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. <sup>12</sup>She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. <sup>13</sup>“Dear woman, why are you crying?” the angels asked her.

“Because they have taken away my Lord,” she replied, “and I don’t know where they have put him.”

<sup>14</sup>She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him. <sup>15</sup>“Dear woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who are you looking for?”

She thought he was the gardener. “Sir,” she said, “if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

<sup>16</sup>“Mary!” Jesus said.

She turned to him and cried out, “Rabboni!” (which is Hebrew for “Teacher”).

John 20:1-16 (NLT)



## **A Bureaucratic Blunder**

In the final days of the first Gulf War in 1991, as American troops liberated occupied Kuwait and advanced far into southern Iraq, a young American Marine corporal named Dwayne, traveling with his unit, came perilously close to a buried land mine that erupted. The explosion sent some shrapnel into his leg, cracking a bone and lacerating the skin. He was rushed to a field hospital, and then evacuated by helicopter back to the base hospital in Saudi Arabia for treatment. Surgeons set the bone and secured it with a pin; the wound was cleaned and stitched and the leg put in a cast. And then it happened: a clerk at the hospital, entering the data on his admission, mistakenly put his name on the wrong list. The word was flashed to the Pentagon that Dwayne was “Killed in Action,” not “Wounded.”

The military bureaucracy kicked into action. Dwayne’s parents were notified. The tragic news spread instantly throughout the small town of Douglass, Kansas. Flags were lowered, people who knew Dwayne since he was a child began to mourn, the high school principal called an all-school assembly to announce the tragic news, the church began planning for the funeral with full military honors, and his parents and younger siblings were inconsolable. All through that day and the next day; all through that long night and the next long night, the black cloud of sorrow hung like a storm cloud over that town. For his mother and father, who had such hopes and dreams for their oldest child and had invested so much in him, it felt as if their entire future had just crumbled to dust. We can imagine the grief, the devastation, the feelings of hopelessness.

## **The Fog of Grief**

It was nearly 2,000 years earlier when grieving people went through similar long days and nights. Their hopes for the future had likewise been pulverized by devastating news of a death. And many of these

grieving people had actually witnessed it themselves: saw the blood loss from brutal scourging, the sharp nails of crucifixion, the agonizing collapse of lungs and the filling of the chest cavity from congestive heart failure, and the “coup de grace”: a spear thrust under the ribs and right into the heart, which would have killed anyone if he hadn’t already been dead. They saw the lifeless body lowered to the ground, and wrapped and mummified by layers of cloth in the ancient tradition, and then placed in a sealed grave. If ever there was a moment of finality, this was it.

The mourning mother and closest friends were joined in their grief and shock by most of the city of Jerusalem. Although a mob of rabble-rousers and professional protestors had been hired by the conspiratorial politicians to orchestrate what looked to the hapless Roman governor like a groundswell of public demand for his death, it was all just a lie, an orchestrated illusion—perhaps the original “fake news.” Nearly all of the people of Jerusalem had been enthusiastic and jubilant during the ticker-tape entry parade of this great celebrity into the capital city five days earlier. His popularity was soaring to the top of the charts; His poll numbers were unprecedented; His name was on everyone’s lips. With fascination they whispered to one another in homes and marketplaces, did you hear what He said in the temple courts today? Did you see Him heal that person? Did you witness how He exposed the hypocrisy and corruption of our leaders? Have you looked into His eyes and seen the love and compassion there for the lowliest of outcasts?

And so they struggled to make sense of what had just happened. We had thought this Man might be the One we have been hoping and praying for. We believed that He was the One sent from God to show us the way. But obviously we were wrong. Because now He’s gone. And nothing can undo the terrible cruelty and injustice inflicted on Him. How could everything change so quickly, in just a few hours? And so the long day of Friday led to the sleepless night of Friday night, which led to the day of hopelessness of Saturday and then the night of depression of Saturday night. The future looked bleak and grim, with no glimmer of relief on the horizon. All was dark and sorrowful.

On top of the grief and hopelessness felt in every street and alley of Jerusalem, an extra burden of guilt lay on the crushed backs of His closest

friends. They had all been there, and when He was arrested in the middle of the night they all scattered and ran away to save their own skins. One of them, Peter, had the additional burden of remorse from having denied to strangers that he even knew Him.

Trying to work through this oppressive grief, a woman from their group named Mary headed to the grave while it was still dark on Sunday morning. She didn't know what she'd do when she got there. She just knew she needed to be there.

### **A Shocking Moment**

Let's return to the military hospital in 1991. On the third day, Dwayne was feeling better. The anesthesia from the surgery had worn off, and he had gotten up on crutches that morning, beginning to practice how to walk. After his physical therapy session he hobbled to the nurse's station and asked if he could call home. Technology was more primitive than it is now, and it took awhile to set up a satellite phone link. The military operator finally was able to place the call to Douglass, Kansas. When Dwayne's mother picked up the phone, the operator announced to her, "I have a call from your son." She put the phone aside and bitterly said to her husband, "Some sick joker is on the phone." How could someone be so cruel as to pretend to be her son, when she knew that he was dead?

Mary went to the cemetery at dawn that Sunday morning in Jerusalem, expecting nothing more than to be able to sit by the grave and weep, processing her private grief. What she found was nothing like what she expected. The grave was opened. The massive grave stone—most likely a round stone that had been rolled into a slot at the doorway of the tomb—had somehow been pushed uphill and away from the entry (it would have taken a team of horses to do it).

Mary understandably panicked. She ran to tell some others. They strapped on their Nike sandals and dashed to the cemetery themselves. What they found there seemed to make no sense. A well-equipped band of grave robbers might have been able to overpower the Roman sentries posted as watchmen, cut off the ropes that had been attached to anchor the stone and managed to haul the stone away with horses ... but if they had done so, why were the grave wrappings still there? Robbers wouldn't

have taken the time to unwrap the body and then re-wrap all the linen cloths and lay them just as they had been. The only other possible explanation was that the body passed right through linens and disappeared, leaving them hollowed out but in their exact place. And yet that would be impossible ... right? Or maybe it **had** happened, just as He had said it would before He was crucified, and just as the Old Testament had hinted might occur. They stumbled back home, rubbing their foreheads while trying to solve the mystery.

### **The Sound of a Voice**

Let's return once more to Kansas in 1991. The sat-phone operator, hearing no one on the other end of the line, handed the phone to Dwayne. He called out loudly into it, "Mom! Mom!" Thousands of miles away, the grieving mother heard that voice coming through the receiver—a voice she thought she'd never hear again—and her heart leapt. "Dwayne, is that really you?" Tears poured down her cheeks like Niagara as he told her what happened, assured her that he was fine, and promised that he'd be home soon. It was the shocking and thrilling and unexpected news she didn't dare to even hope for. In an instant, at the sound of her son's voice, everything had changed.

Back to ancient Jerusalem. Mary returned, after the two men had been to the cemetery and departed. Her head was spinning. On top of all the evil and cruelty already inflicted on that wonderful Man who had changed her life so profoundly, how could this other outrage have occurred? Why would grave robbers want to steal His body? Unlike many wealthy people who were buried in those days with gold and jewels enclosed in their mummy wrap, He had not been wealthy—and certainly had no money buried with him. Was it because the tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, a rich and prominent man, that the thieves thought there would be something valuable inside? Maybe they didn't know whose body it was.

Her mind muddled by all these questions, and her lenses foggy from tears, she looked inside the grave and two blindingly-bright creatures asked her why she was crying. Why wouldn't she cry? Her world had fallen apart. Then she sensed another person nearby and she pleaded with him to help relocate the body.

Verse 16 of our text is one of the most touching, moving and tender verses in all the Bible. Jesus simply speaks her name in His own voice. Just as the grieving mother in Kansas heard that one word and it changed everything, so Mary heard the voice she loved—which she thought was silenced forever—speak her name once again. Instantly, the storm clouds of grief were blown away. She spoke back to Him the affectionate title she called Him. “Rabboni” is the precious, intimate term for a Rabbi. It literally means “*My* Teacher” or “*Beloved* Teacher” or “*Dear* Teacher.” That deep friendship they had known, interrupted so cruelly and unexpectedly for her three days earlier, was now restored and deepened. Mary would never be the same. Nor would the world!

### **Easter Speaks to Everyone**

Why do we remember this dramatic reversal of fortunes in a long-ago and far-away graveyard? Why is Easter so important that perhaps 200 million Americans or more will celebrate it this weekend? Because Easter speaks to everyone.

We all have experienced, or we will, the long days and long nights when hope seems to be crushed, and our fears or our grief seem to overwhelm us. Many people here today have buried someone they love very much. Many of us have faced serious problems and obstacles and uncertainties at some point in our lives. Worry and anxiety and depression are no strangers to most of us. The thoughts and emotions of those grieving disciples, and that grieving family and town in Kansas, are completely human and understandable. We can relate not just intellectually but on the deepest emotional level to what it felt like on Friday and Saturday after Christ was crucified.

We are also drawn in wonder and fascination to that empty tomb on Easter morning because for the first time ever in human history Death—our ultimate opponent—was soundly defeated. Previously there had been some examples of people who had recovered from serious injury and illness, and some people had even been revived and restored to life when it had seemed that they were clinically dead. Just a couple weeks before the events of this day, Jesus Himself had resuscitated a friend of his named Lazarus, to the amazement and wonder of all of Jerusalem. But this: this was different. This was a defeat of Death at an entirely

different level. This was a knockout blow against the previously undefeated and arrogant champion. This was the humbling of the big bully who had intimidated everyone. This changed human destiny, offering to us mortal humans for the first time the powerful hope that we too might share in the resurrection, and might be able to live forever by faith in the Risen Champion Jesus.

### **The Good Shepherd**

The unforgettable scene of Jesus tenderly speaking Mary's name, and her recognition of His voice through the temporary blindness of her tears and confusion of her mind, communicates powerfully to us. It reminds us of the intimacy of the personal relationship God wants to have with every one of us. It confirms to us that we are not just one insignificant grain of sand along the vast shoreline of earth, but are actually precious and important to him as an individual.

Jesus Himself, shortly before His death and resurrection, spoke to His followers (and perhaps Mary herself heard these words). He described Himself as the Good or Perfect Shepherd. It was an obvious and unmistakable connection to the most beloved passage of the Old Testament, which they all knew by heart. Psalm 23: "The LORD is my Shepherd." Jesus, revealing Himself as God in the flesh, said this in John 10: "The sheep recognize His voice and come to Him. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. They follow Him because they know His voice." And isn't that just what we see in the cemetery on Easter morning: Jesus the Shepherd calls Mary by name, and she hears His voice and recognizes Him.

As astounding as it may seem, Jesus—the great Shepherd, the Lord of all and Savior of mankind, the Risen One who conquered death—actually knows your name and mine. He cares about us intimately and personally. He longs for us to turn to Him in faith, trust in Him, and enjoy a personal relationship with us. Most often He speaks to us not in dramatic or flashy ways, but quietly and intimately.

That's one of the things I love about the account in John 20. He did not appear to Mary with pyrotechnics and spectacle and drama, like a Super Bowl halftime singer arriving in smoke and lights or dropping in from the ceiling to great applause. Instead, He comes up quietly behind

Mary and whispers her name. How beautiful. Don't look for Jesus in the flash and glitz of the world. Listen instead to His voice calling **you** by name.

## A Solid Hope

And finally, Easter is beloved because it gives us a solid and secure hope for our future that stretches beyond the grave to eternity. There are times when life here on earth is good—it can be fun, it can be meaningful, it can be fulfilling. But there are other times when it feels hard, and tragic, and the way seems so unsure and our hope dims. Beyond it all—beyond the best of times and the worst of times—there awaits an eternity in the presence of Jesus. It is promised to us to be an experience beyond the joys of this world, and with none of the sorrows. It is what Jesus offers to us: to share in the blessings of His great victory.

A well-known pastor and author of a previous generation was approaching the end of his life, knowing that his remaining days were few as a fatal disease consumed his body. His daughter was assisting him by his bedside, writing letters to friends that he was dictating to her. As one of his letters came to a close he spoke these words: "Thanks for your concern. I am still in the land of the living." And then he thought for a moment, and asked his daughter to rewrite the page as follows: "I am still in the land of the dying. But I hope soon, by my trust in Jesus, to be in the **land of the living.**" What an insight! The world we see and touch and live in now is filled with people who are dying. But because of Easter, we can look forward one day to truly being in "the land of the living," where death will never touch us.

