Catch the Easter Excitement

First in the series of the same title

## Who was at the tomb first?

While John mentions only Mary Madelene, the other gospels indicate she was not alone. Matthew 28:1 mentions another Mary who is identified in Mark and Luke (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10) as Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph. Both Mark and Luke include both Mary’s and add a third person, Salome in Mark and Joanna in Luke. Luke also specifically mentions that there were others (Luke 24:10). These names do not spring from nowhere but continue the account. John 19:25 mentions four women at the cross, three of whom are named Mary. Also, Mark 15:47 mentions that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph (and James the younger v. 40) saw where Jesus was buried. Considering the data, it is not a problem that the different Gospels mention different women as being present at the resurrection. All four mention Mary Magdalene. The writers are not trying to make an exact list, but simply giving key names and getting right to the point of the story, the empty tomb and the fact that the women of which Mary Magdalene was the leading figure, reported it first to the disciples. Mary Magdalene is probably most prominent because of Jesus’ appearance to her and the dialogue that is reported in John 20:11-18.

# Scripture: John 20:1-18

# Key Thought: The exciting discovery that the tomb of Jesus was empty calls us to believe!

# Intro:

## Scientific discoveries

One of the things I find fascinating in the news are reports of scientific discoveries. For example, while scientists had long theorized about the existence of black holes, just recently, an international collaboration of scientists, using a planet-scale array of eight ground-based radio telescopes, revealed the first visual image created from direct observation of a black hole. You may have seen it on the news.

In another field of study, recently, curators in a Kenyan museum made a surprising discovery of an earthly sort. Apparently the right person opened a drawer of fossils in their museum and recognized that the teeth they were seeing were not from any known species. They belonged to a long extinct hyena-like predator which may have weighed 3000 lbs. Now that would have been a scary creature.

## The Easter Discovery

But as one reflects upon various discoveries over the centuries, there is one discovery that stands out far above all the others as the most significant of all discoveries. It has had a greater effect upon the generations of humankind since it was made than any other. It has changed history more profoundly then even the discovery of the New World by Europeans, as epoch changing as that was. The momentous event I’m talking about was the discovery that the tomb of Jesus Christ was empty. That momentous discovery was made on the first Easter morning by the women who went very early in the morning to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with spices. Still today, all around the world people congregate each Sunday because of that discovery; and we are here again this morning to celebrate it again.

# The excitement of discovery

## The women at the tomb

Mary Magdalene’s and the other women’s purpose in going to the tomb early on that first Sunday morning after the crucifixion was to add spices to the body of Jesus. This was a way both of honoring the deceased and of helping to preserve the body.

## Who Rolled the stone away?

The Apostle Matthew alone preserves information about what happened with the guard posted at Jesus’ tomb. There are three short segments in Matthew’s Gospel; all of which relate to the guards posted at the tomb and all of which occur only in Matthew’s gospel (27:62-66; 28:2-4; 11-15). It is hard to see how this would have happened unless Matthew had access to reliable information that came to him from the guards or someone close to them. Matthew’s Gospel implies that it was the guards rather than the women, who witnessed the stone rolled away. And Matthew states clearly that it was not Jesus, but the angel who rolled away the stone. Jesus did not need the stone rolled away in order to rise, but we needed to see that the tomb was empty. All three of the other gospels agree that when Mary arrived, the stone was already rolled away (Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1). Luke explains that the women entered the tomb and did not find the body of Jesus and it was “while they were wondering about this” that they saw angels.

As they arrived they made the discovery of the centuries; the tomb of Jesus was empty! The women’s’ discovery apparently had two phases. First, they discovered the tomb was empty. It was the most momentous discovery of all time, but they did not yet understand its meaning and immensity. The second discovery was the meaning of what they had seen. The interpretation did not come from their own minds, but was provided to them by the angel messengers who said;

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said”
(Mt 28:5-6 NIV).

Then they went to tell Peter and John and the others – before Mary met Jesus. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were aware of an early notification which included knowledge of the angel messenger to the women but was before Mary saw Jesus (Luke 24:23).

## Peter and John’s Process of Discovery

Let’s focus for a moment upon Peter and John who came running to the tomb after the women had told them that it was empty. When the Apostle John chronicles the Easter morning sequence of discovery, he intentionally uses four key words in his description. The first three of them all relate to seeing. He uses three Greek synonyms to help us understand the process of discovery that he and Peter went through when they went to the tomb. The NRSV translates all three with the English word “saw.” The fourth word is “believe,” which describes the result of the first three. Let’s look at the three words for seeing so we can understand and appropriate for ourselves the meaning of Jesus resurrection.

* John says first that when he arrived, he simply looked in and saw the strips of linen lying there (Greek blepo – to look at, v. 5). This word could be described as a state of discovery where it registers in our mind that something is unusual. We acknowledge that it might be helpful to us to know more. We become curious. The NIV tries to help us with this sequence by translating this word as “looked at.” We might say, “He noticed.” This is the first step in our exposure to the resurrection too – we take notice.
* The second word that John uses to describe the process of discovery means to examine carefully (Greek theoreo – to examine carefully and consider, v. 6 ). It’s the word from which our English word “theory” is derived. He uses this word of Peter’s actions when he enters the tomb and examines the positions of the limp graveclothes. This word corresponds to the phase of discovery where we begin to dig for the facts, and we question the meaning of what we have found. We investigate with our eyes and think about how this applies to our lives and what difference it might make. That’s what happened in their minds as they began to look further at the empty tomb.
* The third word that John uses to describe this discovery process means to see and know the meaning (Greek eiden – to see and know the meaning, v. 8). He uses this word when he describes what happened to him when he personally understood and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. This word means we see and we “get it.” This is what happens to us when the process of thinking about the facts and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts reaches its conclusion and we personally understand the meaning of the resurrection for us.
* Lastly, John says, he believed. This word is tied together (in verse 8) with his word see [eiden] meaning to know and understand. The result of the sequence of looking, examining and then understanding is that he responded in faith believing. He cast his lot with the resurrected Jesus, even before he had seen Jesus alive for himself, as he did later that evening.

## Our journey to believing

This four-fold process which was at work for John, Mary Magdalene, Peter and the other disciples on that first Easter morning, is still at work in the hearts of those who hear the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus proclaimed today. I have used four blocks in the diagram, one for each of these four words. First we take notice of the story of the resurrection. Maybe we hear it in a sermon. Then we begin to examine more closely the things we are hearing. Maybe we read the Scripture for ourselves. Perhaps we even consult historical witnesses as Lee Strobel who wrote The Case for Easter did. Next we turn it over in our mind and with the help of the Holy Spirit we come to understand what God has done. The light of God’s truth breaks through and we too trust in Christ as our Savior and become his follower.

# The excitement of meeting

## Mary meets Jesus

But the experience of knowing Jesus, is not just a cognitive thing. It is a very personal one. In the next part of the Easter morning events we see another part of what it means to know Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us first that Mary finds the tomb empty and runs to Peter and John with that news. They respond by going to the tomb and affirming that discovery. The tomb is empty. In harmonizing the various Gospel stories, I think of Mary as then returning to the tomb with Peter and John. Matthew and John both record that when Mary turned again to go, a living presence met her. It was Jesus, though she did not recognize him at first. (Mark 16:9 simply says that Jesus appeared first to Mary without giving the story. Luke does not record this appearance of Jesus.) Jesus wanted them to know that his resurrection was not just a cold fact, it was personal. His rising from the dead was not just something to believe in, he was a living presence to get to know again. If they had loved him before, which they had, they would love him so much more now.

## The other disciples meet Jesus

This excitement of meeting the living Christ in person then happened to the other disciples as well. That afternoon he appeared to two on the Emmaus road. Luke records that he had also appeared that same day to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34). That evening Jesus came into the Upper Room where the disciples were gathered and spoke to them in person, to all but Thomas who was not there. John tells the story of how doubting Thomas also met Jesus personally on the next Sunday evening Not too many years later, Jesus met with Paul personally on the Damascus Road in the form of a voice from heaven.

## People still meet Jesus today

In my experience as a pastor, I’ve discovered that Jesus is still about the business of making our spiritual discovery not just an intellectual one, but a personal one. He wants us to know that the gospel is not just true, it is personal.

 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Rev 3:20 NIV

I came to know Jesus personally as a little boy. I had begun to feel convicted that I needed to make a personal decision to follow Jesus. One night I must have told my mother this for I remember kneeling next to her at the couch in our living room and opening my life to Jesus Christ. It was the beginning of my spiritual journey.

For some the moment is dramatic and miraculous. I know people who have seen visions and heard voices. But I’ve also known others whose moment of deciding and believing was much quieter even then mine. That is because Jesus deals with each one of us personally.

Mikio Toyoshima was a Japanese businessman. His business failed and his intention was to commit suicide. But his wife left an open Bible on his desk with 1Corinthians 10:13 underlined.

 “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

The Holy Spirit ministered to his heart and he committed his life to Jesus instead. Through that moment he became a new person in Jesus Christ. God met him personally when and where he needed it most.

A while ago I was reading on another church’s website, and they had posted the story of a lady named Debra from that church. She’s a mother of two. But the story begins when she was only 10. She met another family, the Davies family. There was a peaceful atmosphere when she was with them, she recalls, and she loved spending time with them. They were a good influence and often took her to church. She remembers being taught about God there, and how God wants to save us. One particular day, at young people’s meeting, she remembers, “I was given a piece of paper which said, ‘If I died tonight, I will go to h….’” It frightened her because she knew the answer and she did not want to fill it in. Soon after that time she prayed and asked Jesus to come into her life. She says, “I knew I needed him.” But somehow that early devotion to Jesus did not last long. She stopped going to church. She wrote that she, “wanted to do her own thing.” She had lots of friends and wasn’t really thinking about God. She met her husband and they had two beautiful children. When the children started to grow, she decided to take them to church. But she recalls, “I used to hide under my hymnbook as we were singing. I was in tears, thinking, ‘What have I done with my life?’ I realized what a fool I’d been but I knew God was working in me – she loved me and wanted me back and I started to live for God and not for myself and my husband could see the difference, and the church leaders saw the change to. I think I finally understood that as a Christian you have to walk with the Lord and choose a different path. I’d spent lots of times with different people when I was a teenager but I was on a path to disaster. You can’t walk both paths; it’s one or the other. I do still get doubts – sometimes I think I’m not good enough, but I keep reminding myself that it’s all about how good Jesus is! If I had that piece of paper now, I would write ‘heaven’ knowing what God has done for me.” What a wonderful testimony of how Debra was touched by God more than once in her life during her journey of becoming a Christ follower.

I think of the famous painting where the finger of God reaches out and touches the limp finger of Adam.

 I think of that moment in the ministry of Jesus when the almighty hand of the Christ reached out and touched the hopeless leper. The leper was healed. Mary Magdalene reached out on that first Easter morning to touch Jesus. On the week after Easter, when Thomas was present with the disciples, Jesus asked Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds.

Jesus wants to personally touch your life too. You will never be the same! His Easter resurrection power is the proof of that.

# The excitement of believing

## The disciples saw the risen Christ and believed

In Matthew’s account of the first Easter morning, he tells us that when the women recognized Jesus, they worshiped him. There was no doubt now. They believed! John wrote that when he went in and saw the graveclothes, he also believed. A week later when Thomas was invited by Jesus to touch his wounds, he also believed.

## Jesus blessed those who believe their testimony

In those moments on that second Sunday night after Easter, Jesus pronounced a blessing on all of us who would believe on him through the words of the apostles.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." John 20:29 NRSV

In John’s gospel, the word “believe” is very important. John tells us that these records of Jesus’ life and especially of his appearances have been written down so that you and I today can know the facts about Jesus resurrection and also come to believe. Why did the apostles take care to record this? Why did the Holy Spirit arrange that these things would be preserved? The apostle John gives us the answer to this in his gospel.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Jn 20:31 NIV

So, our role as the church each year at Easter time is to remember the facts of Jesus resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances. As we do this, we join the journey of discovery of those early disciples once again. We cannot help it! We must interact with the facts presented to us in the gospel records. And our role is to present those facts to others so they can join the journey too.

## Many people today seek to avoid this journey to belief

They really don’t want to try to interact with the records of Jesus resurrection. Some would just rather adopt a shallow Christianity which tries to hold onto some general loving principles-- pleasant leftover vestiges of formerly robust Christian beliefs. The Bible describes such as

“Holding to a form of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5 NRSV)

Other people realize that if they truly looked at the resurrection story, they, like the early disciples would have to fall at Jesus feet and worship and surrender their lives to him. Perhaps this is something they do not want to do, so they try to avoid dealing with a powerful events of Easter morning. The Apostle John later wrote about this kind of response to Easter;

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. John 3:19-20 NIV

## The difference it makes

### We can have victory

One might well ask, what difference does it make when someone believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? It certainly is not the end of troubles. Jesus warned the disciples that in this world they would have troubles. But he also gave them a hint as to what it might mean to serve the only one to conquer death. He continued,

But take heart! I have overcome the world! (John 16:33)

It certainly was true, both for the first century disciples and for us today, that there are plenty of troubles as we go through life. Relationships can be difficult. “Not everyone has faith!” (2 Thess. 3:2). But in the resurrection of Jesus, we behold a God who was able to bring victory out of despair. In the resurrection of Jesus, we understand that the strength of God at work in us is greater than the evil at work in the world. As John famously put it,

Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. 1 John 4:4 KJV

We can be overcomers because of Jesus. We can overcome difficult circumstances, as God gives us strength to continue. We can overcome temptation as God gives shows us the way out and the way for victory.

### We are transformed

Because of the resurrection, we can sing that we believe in resurrection and restoration as our choir did today. We can testify that we serve a God of the second chance and the third chance and more. Because of the resurrection, we believe that God makes a new creation in our own hearts. He helps us to jettison old habits that don’t fit with following Jesus. The Holy Spirit renews our minds, setting our affections on the interests of God’s kingdom more than on pleasures of this world. None of this transformation would be possible without the resurrection of Jesus Christ to give it power. Our God brings spiritual transformation. Listen to how the Apostle Paul described it.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church. Eph 1:18-22 NIV

### God’s spiritual power is at work through us

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s power is available to us as we pray. God’s gifts flow in the church through the Holy Spirit. God’s love flows through us to other people to help us serve the needs of those around us. Jesus power of forgiveness enables us to forgive when others wrong us. The joy of the Holy Spirit gives us strength. God answers prayer, sometimes miraculously, all because of the power unleashed in the resurrection of Jesus.

### We have eternal life

Because of the resurrection we can have eternal life. That wonderful gift of God for his people which the Bible calls “eternal life” has two facets. First it is a relationship with God that starts now. It is a quality of life that has to do with knowing God and trusting in Jesus. As Jesus said in his high priestly prayer,

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17:3 NIV

Eternal life is also that quality of life that does not end with death, it supersedes it, in fact, death is the introduction into its culmination. As the Apostle Peter wrote;

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:3-5 NIV

Because of the resurrection, our grief for loved ones has a silver lining. We believe in resurrection. We grieve with hope because Jesus gives the gift of eternal life.

# Conclusion

This is just the beginning of describing the difference that it makes to us because Jesus is risen from the dead. Our potential is so much higher because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this resurrection morning, I encourage you and I encourage myself to live in hope! Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we can only begin to describe the possibilities, the strength, the hope, and the giftings that have been unleashed for us through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Hallelujah. The Lord is Risen Indeed! What do you need to take home with you in your heart to help you live in hope and victory this week because Jesus is risen! It is available! Reach out by faith to the Risen Christ!