

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's an old saying that we should measure our lives not by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away. Perhaps many, if not most of us, have too few of those moments.

We can name some things that fit that category: the birth of a baby, a hard-won accomplishment, a delightful surprise. Those kinds of things take our breath away. But after a certain age, we perhaps begin to notice that we have even fewer of those moments.

After a while, it may feel as if we have pretty much seen everything. Nothing much surprises us. Maybe as children we would rush in wide-eyed excitement to the Christmas tree to check out our presents, but that kind of abandon typically doesn't happen to us later in life.

Well, that very feeling of excitement that you can't wait to experience is at the heart of our Easter Gospel. Each of the four gospel writers paints a slightly different scene of exactly what happened on that Sunday morning at the tomb.

In John, Mary Magdalene goes by herself to the tomb while it is still dark. By isolating Mary, John allows us to watch faith develop.

We should not miss the significance of John telling us that it is dark when she goes to the tomb.

In Luke, Mary goes with other women to the tomb, and they go at dawn. In John, though, Mary goes by herself while it is still dark. And in John, darkness seems to represent unbelief, or even sin.

A key line in John is that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5).” When Judas goes out to betray Jesus, it is night (John 13:30). When Mary goes to the tomb in darkness, we are to understand that the forces of evil surround her.

What John paints for us is a scene where we can watch faith grow and develop. When Mary goes to the tomb, she is alone, apart from a community that could nurture her faith. The darkness of night keeps her from seeing clearly in a physical sense.

In her heart is the darkness of unbelief. In John, we're not told why she goes to the tomb, but she apparently assumes that the spiritual darkness that infects all of creation has won the battle.

When Mary arrives at the tomb, she sees something she doesn't expect. The stone has been moved from the entrance to the tomb. She knows that something has changed, something new has come up, but she doesn't know what it means. She assumes something bad has happened.

She runs off to tell Peter and the unidentified “beloved disciple.” She tells them that an unspecified “they” have moved Jesus’ body. Mary thinks that Jesus’ body has been taken, perhaps disrespected and treated shabbily. She tells the two disciples. Mary then moves off stage, as the focus shifts to them.

These two disciples do something unexpected. Two grown men, who’ve been around, do something we would expect children to do. When these two disciples hear that the stone has been moved, they run toward the scene.

This tale of the stone being moved makes these two men throw aside their dignity and run toward the tomb. As I said earlier, the gospel writers each have their distinctive touches in their presentation of the empty tomb.

Matthew reports an earthquake, signifying that the nature itself responds to the resurrection. John has this footnote, and it’s significant on more than one level. One thing it means is that the news of the stone being rolled away grips these two disciples at a very deep level.

This news is something to rush out and see! They don’t quite know if the stone’s removal is a good thing, or a bad thing. Nevertheless, it represents hope, a new possibility.

Please take note of what they see when they enter. Jesus’ grave clothes are stacked up neatly.

Please note the significance of this. Remember Lazarus, Mary and Martha’s brother who died? In John, chapter 11, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life. And when Lazarus came out of the tomb, he was still wearing his grave clothes.

The grave clothes distinguish between what happened to Lazarus and what happened to Jesus. Lazarus came back to this life, but he did not undergo transformation. Jesus was resurrected.

We’re often told that what happens when we die is that our body passes away and our soul floats up to heaven. But the New Testament does not teach that. The idea of the soul leaving the dead body comes from Greek philosophy, not the New Testament.

The New Testament teaches that all of who we are — body, soul and spirit — becomes transformed. The two disciples see the grave clothes in the tomb for that reason. The scene demonstrates that the resurrection includes every part of us.

No part of us is immortal by nature. We live on only because God transforms us. God affirms all of creation, even the material world, including our bodies.

The two disciples see the empty grave clothes. The “beloved disciple” allows Peter to go in first, but notice that it’s the “beloved disciple” who *believes* first.

The word “believe” plays a key role for John. After the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water to wine, the disciples believed (John 2:11). God sent the Son so that we might believe and have eternal life (John 3:16).

When we believe, we let go of our doubt. When we believe, we trust. When we believe, we stand in awe of and in gratitude toward God. The “beloved disciple” believes.

And a strange thing happens next: The two disciples simply leave. They see the empty tomb, but then go back home. The next scene has Mary Magdalene outside the tomb. John never explains where she was during the footrace, and while the disciples were entering the tomb.

Did she arrive after the two disciples left? Why didn’t they go tell her what the stone being moved away meant? We can’t answer those questions, but we know that John wrote in this way for a reason: he wanted to show us Mary’s developing faith.

She had arrived at the tomb in darkness, clouded by doubt. Now she cries in grief because she thinks Jesus’ body has been dumped like so much trash. She sees the angels. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Then even when she recognizes the resurrected Jesus, she can’t touch him.

In the resurrection, we are still ourselves, but we are transformed.

By recounting Jesus’ instruction not to touch him, John conveys to us something similar to what Paul tells us when he says we will have a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44).

When she realizes what has happened, and Jesus calls her by name, she finds her faith. She moves from the darkness of doubt to the fullness of faith. What gives her faith is the reality of the resurrection.

If our faith is waning, the resurrection can sustain us. The resurrection forms the core of our faith. It undergirds everything we believe. It offers God’s “yes” to the world’s “no.” It unites us as Christians when so many other things divide us. It promises healing of body, mind and spirit.

But I want to go back to the great footrace. What would make *us* race to the empty tomb? What would make it so important that we would act like children trying to be first in line for ice cream?

If we find life difficult, if we find life dreary, if we find life painful and frightening, then let us race to the tomb. If we are weary of the violence and hurt in our world, then let us race to the tomb.

If we are weary of the darkness inside ourselves that we can’t seem to dispel, then let us race to the tomb. If we are in sorrow because death has robbed us of a loved one, then let us race to the tomb.

If we are weary of being the victims of political and economic forces beyond our control, then let us race to the tomb. The resurrection gives us hope.

Let us race to the tomb because we need a faith that can survive the troubles and grief of this world. Let us race to the tomb because there we will find life — and hope and peace and joy. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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