

## Finding Our Place in the Story

Rev Ron Dunn

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**Easter.** What a fascinating phenomenon! What a great mystery! What a startling story! It seems that we hardly know what to do with it.

*Do we believe it **literally**? Or do we interpret it **metaphorically**?*

*Does it apply to us **personally** or do we think of it more broadly or **culturally**?*

*Is it merely a quaint **custom** that we keep? Or is it a central **conviction** that we hold?*

Were each of us to answer these questions for ourselves, we would likely offer responses that included “all of the above” and many more, as well. The fact is that Easter means many different things to many different people. Yet, whatever the reason, you have made the choice to be here this morning in order to share in the ritual of Easter worship.

Let me say that I’m glad that you did. Let me also say I trust that what you discover in our shared time together will be enough to persuade you that there is more to all of this than merely perfunctory ritual or mindless devotion. I trust that you will discover what one poet has described as a “collective effervescence” that permeates who we are as a people and the purpose which we seek to fulfill.

With this welcome extended and this hope shared, allow me to lift up the premise of my Easter message and it is this: I believe that the Easter story is, essentially, a story that has lost none of its relevance in this post-modern age. This is, you see, not just a story about what happened to Jesus then and there. It is a story that about what can happen to you and me, here an now. The meaning of resurrection is not something to be **relegated** to the memories of the past, but something to be **anticipated** in the making of our present and our future.

**I would like to suggest that within this ancient account of the drama of Easter, there is a place in the story for each one of us—a place that invites our full participation and our faithful investment. The story of Easter, you see, is essentially an “inter-active” one. It is a story that invokes and invites our own response to the empty tomb. Without that response, the story holds little meaning or value.**

So it is that I would like to invite you to find your place in the story of Easter as we break down the reading from John’s Gospel into two acts—a two act play, if you will. As we reflect upon this unfolding drama, I invite you to reflect upon where you best fit. With what character in the story do you most closely identify?

Unlike the other Gospels, the Gospel of John suggests that it was a single person who first came to the tomb in the darkness of early morning. In the Gospel of John, this is not an idle detail as the theme of darkness and light runs like a thread throughout the narrative. The drama of Easter begins in pre-dawn darkness. Mary Magdalene, the good friend of Jesus, arrives in the darkness to find that the stone had been rolled away. Rather than investigate the mystery, she turns and runs to find Peter and “the other disciple,” that is, the “one that

Jesus loved.” Assuming that thieves had stolen the body, she reported that the body has been taken and that she does not know where.

That is the cue for the footrace that follows—Peter and the other disciple racing to the tomb. We are told that “the other disciple” arrives first. He looks into the tomb and sees the burial clothes folded neatly, but does not go in. But Peter being Peter, does not hesitate upon his arrival at the tomb. He immediately enters. It is then that the “other disciple” follows suit. He too enters the tomb. Intriguingly, the writer then tells us that this “other disciple” saw and believed. Nothing is said about Peter and his own reaction. Was it one of faith or a lack of faith? It’s impossible for the reader to know because the writer doesn’t say.

What we have here, then, is two very different responses to the empty tomb and the possibility of resurrection. One saw and believed. The other saw but gave no indication as to what they were thinking or feeling. This first scene then comes to a conclusion as Peter and the other disciple return home. There’s no indication here that they share the news of what they had just seen with anybody.

**Scene two begins with Mary, once again, at the tomb.** It is possible that the writer of this Gospel combined several sources to produce the narrative of this particular version of the resurrection story. Weeping from her grief, she bends down to look into the tomb and notices two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had once been laid. “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. **“They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him,”** she replies. Then, turning around, she notices someone standing behind her and does not recognize that it is Jesus—just why we can’t be sure.

It is Jesus who then asks her the same question that the angels had asked, **“Woman, why are you weeping?”** Assuming him to be the gardener, she says, **“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”**

What follows is one of the most dramatic moments in all of scripture. Jesus reveals himself to Mary simply by calling her by name. **“Mary!”** he exclaims and suddenly, her eyes and heart were opened and she could see and believe for herself. **“Rabbounni!”** (Teacher) she said. Mary had, once again, regained her focus.

Jesus then cautions her, **“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.”** As a footnote to this exchange, I think that it is important to note that there is, in the experience of resurrection, a temptation to “hold on to” what has been rather than be open to what will be. Sometimes, we choose to hold on to our grief, or our nostalgia, or our comfortable way of doing things, rather than let go and let the Spirit of the risen Christ lead us into a new and uncharted life. What is it, this morning that you are holding on to that might keep you from letting go and letting God lead you into a transformed life?

This second scene then concludes with Mary being the first to bear witness to the good news of the resurrection. She goes to the confused and uncertain disciples and delivers the message that would change them and change their world: **“I have seen the Lord!”**

What we have here, then, are two different scenes and three very different responses to the empty tomb.

- **One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes.**
- **One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything.**
- **And one is startled into believing by hearing the sound of her name.**

That is, I think, quite a spectrum of response—one that, quite possibly, could be reflective of our own response to the resurrection story and its declaration of the empty tomb.

**Some who worship with us this morning**, have the faith of the “other disciple” who simply saw and believed without question or comment. For them, the mystery of the resurrection is one that they simply accept without the need to struggle or doubt. They simply accept it at face value and move on from there.

**Others who worship with us**, are not nearly so accepting or certain. Seeing, for them, is not necessarily believing. Instead, the mystery of the resurrection story is one that raises more questions than answers, more uncertainty than certainty. This doesn’t mean that they don’t believe in the possibility and the promise of resurrection. It’s just that they are still in the process of trying to understand what it all means in their contemporary lives.

**There are still others, here this morning**, for whom the resurrection story is one that is personal—one whose meaning has been made known to them in the mystery of an encounter in which they have heard the sound of their name. And in that moment, they knew. In that moment, they understood. In that moment, they experienced the resurrecting power of God’s love surge through them and they were forever changed.

Barbara Lunblad, in her commentary on this passage, suggests that the writer of John’s Gospel could have taken a much less complicated approach to the story. The writer could have simply had Mary Magdalene, Peter and the “Other Disciple” enter the tomb, notice the grave clothes and believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Short. Sweet. Simple.

Instead the writer leaves room for the reader—that would be us—to find their own place in the resurrection story.

- Do we see and believe without question or comment?
- Do we see and then struggle to believe? To grasp the meaning of this great mystery?
- Or, do we believe because we have heard the sound of our name in a way that is personal?

**Where is your place in this story? With whom do you most closely identify? What is the meaning that you discover in this mystery?**

I don’t know about you, but I like the thought that the writer created these various options with which we can identify. I like the thought that there isn’t, in this account, a “one size fits all” response that forces everyone into the same mold—a mold that doesn’t necessarily fit. This is especially true because I suspect that many of us will recognize that our response to

the mystery of the resurrection is one that may vary from time to time—depending upon the circumstances of our lives. It is quite possible—indeed, quite likely—that we can identify with each of one of these responses at one time or another. That is, after all, the way life often seems to work. It's not often neat and simple. It can be messy and complex. And our ability to grasp the meaning and significance of the empty tomb is one that will likely change and evolve over time.

What ultimately matters, it seems to me, is that we understand that this story is not just about Jesus and his resurrection. It is, I believe, about us and our own resurrection. It is about us and our own ability to face down the forces of death and discover, in the process, that there is a hope...there is a love...there is life that cannot and will not be denied.

There is, to be sure, a place in the story for each one of us. We can approach the meaning and the mystery of the resurrection from different viewpoints and different perspectives. But, ultimately, it seems to me, what really matters is not our theory about resurrection, but our willingness to put it into practice in the context of our day to day lives.

In what specific ways are you practicing the reality of resurrection?

**Peter Rollins** offers a monologue that is intentionally designed to get his listener's attention. He begins by making the statement that he “fully and completely denies the resurrection of Christ.” Then, after a poignant pause, he continues...

“I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed. I deny the resurrection of Christ each day that I turn my back on the poor. I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.”

Then, after allowing these thoughts to settle in, he goes on to add: “There are, however, moments when I affirm the resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm the resurrection when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears to shed.”

Rollins raises the critical question: **“Do we deny or do we affirm the meaning and the power of the resurrection in the way we live our lives?”**

Wherever we find ourselves in the resurrection story, this, I believe, is the question that looms before us...the question that we will answer in the choices we make, the compassion that we show, the love that we share, and the hope that we bring to others and to our world. Amen.