

April 4, 2021
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-9



Note: There are three possible Gospel readings for the celebration of Easter. Matthew 28:1-10 is usually read at the Easter Vigil Mass, John 20:1-9 is recommended for Masses in the early morning, and Luke 24:13-35 is used for afternoon celebrations. The vigil Mass in most communities is when the new members of the community are

baptized and welcomed to the Lord's Table for the first time. It is usually a beautiful and faith-filled celebration. However, the majority of people typically attend one of the Masses on Easter Sunday morning. In addition, the gospel from Luke will also be proclaimed on the Third week of Easter. Therefore, the focus here is on the text from John's gospel.

John 20:1-9

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." 3 So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. 4 They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; 5 he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. 6 When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, 7 and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. 8 Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. 9 For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead.

Background

This familiar gospel text may seem an unusual choice for Easter, for the Risen Lord is not encountered. The text centers on the empty tomb and the first disciples' encounter with the absence of the body of Jesus. Because John's gospel was not written until about the year 90, belief in the resurrection was not based on first-hand experience of the risen Christ, but on the testimony and faith of the Christian community. Their faith journey had its beginning, like ours does, on the faith and testimony of those who had come before them.

John begins this text while it is dark. Mary of Magdala, Peter, and the disciples are all in the dark about what has really taken place. When Mary discovers the empty tomb, she presumes that someone has taken the body. The text does not suggest that she even considered the possibility that Jesus has risen. But by including that Mary first believed that the body was stolen, John confronts those who suggested that the Christians' belief in resurrection could more easily be explained if the fact was that someone had removed the body.

Throughout his gospel, John frequently uses a lack of understanding by those who encountered Jesus as a tool for Jesus to offer a further explanation of his role. Because of their lack of understanding, the people were presented an opportunity to receive further clarification and be brought to a deeper faith.

Think of the accounts of the woman at the well, the man born blind, and even Martha and Mary. Mary's lack of understanding at the tomb is not a problem, because she has faith in Jesus. The understanding will continue to develop within her, as it does within the early disciples.

The texts that will be used throughout the Easter season will highlight this development. Next Sunday, the text will describe the disciples' first encounter with the risen Lord in the upper room. In a few weeks, the Gospel will describe the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Reflection Questions

1. If someone were to say to you that they were in the dark, what might they be telling you?
2. Why might Mary have gone to the tomb of Jesus before the dawn?
3. Why do you think John included in his gospel the fact that Mary of Magdala went to the tomb first?
4. What does the fact that Mary ran to tell Peter and the other disciple, and they both ran back to the tomb, suggest to you?
5. The three disciples that experience the empty tomb all respond differently. Mary Magdalene runs to tell Peter and the other disciple. Peter actually goes into the tomb and sees the wrappings that had covered Jesus' body. The other disciple goes into the tomb after him, and then believes. Which of these three feels closest to your own response as you read this gospel today?
6. How do you think that all three disciples and their different responses to the empty tomb are important to John's gospel? How are they important to you?
7. Can you take some time now to talk with God honestly about your situation, your feelings as you approach this Easter, and what you need God to teach/show you about the life that God desires to reveal to you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>

