

Easter Sunday

Isa 65:17-25, 1Cor 15:19-26, John 20:1-18

John 20: 8 "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

All four Gospels give an account of the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. The first three Gospels (or at least Mark and Luke) seem to suggest that the burial of Jesus had been a rather hasty affair, so that it might be carried out before the beginning of the Sabbath, and his body had not been properly prepared for burial. So very early in the morning on the first day of the week, some of the women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb, bringing perfumed oils and spices, in order to do for him what should have been done on the Friday afternoon.

John's account is a little different in this respect. According to him, the body of Jesus was already anointed before burial, as was the custom, with spices brought by Nicodemus. John tells us that Mary Magdalene alone went to the tomb early on the first day of the week while it was still dark.

We are not told the purpose of her visit, but we can assume that she was simply following the natural human wish of anyone who has just been bereaved of a loved one to go to be as close as possible to the last mortal remains of that person.

It must have come as quite a shock to her to see that the stone, which had sealed the entrance to the tomb, had been removed. We are not told that she stopped to look in the tomb, though we may suppose that she did, since her immediate reaction was to run to Jesus's disciples, the news, saying, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Her use of the plural "we" may be a hint that she had not been alone in going to the tomb, just as the other Gospels tell us that it was two or more women who went to the tomb on the Sunday morning, though John speaks only of Mary Magdalene.

She reported the news of the empty tomb to two of the most prominent of Jesus's disciples, Peter and the disciple "whom Jesus loved". Peter is, of course, very well known from all four of the Gospels, and we know more about him than any of the other apostles. He is the first in the lists of the Twelve, a fisherman whom Jesus called together with his brother Andrew; he is the one who affirmed his faith in Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, and one of those who witnessed Jesus's transfiguration. Despite denying Jesus after his arrest, Peter would soon become an important witness of the risen Christ, and would go on to be foremost among the leaders of the early church.

But what of that other disciple, the one "whom Jesus loved"? This disciple is mentioned only in John's Gospel, where he is referred to five times. The first time is at the Passover meal, the occasion when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, which in John's Gospel takes the place of the Last Supper in the other Gospels, and John tells us that the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining in the bosom of Jesus (13:23).

The second time we meet this disciple is at the crucifixion of Jesus. From the cross, Jesus sees his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing close by, and he says to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!", and to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"

The next time we hear of the disciple whom Jesus loved is in John 20, in today's Gospel reading about the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. When Mary Magdalene came and reported her news to Peter and this disciple, they both ran to the tomb, to see for themselves what had happened. The disciple outran Peter, and reached the tomb first. He stooped to look in, and saw the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, but did not go in. Then Peter arrived and, ever the rash impetuous one, did not so hesitate to enter the tomb, but went in and saw the linen cloths lying about, and the napkin that had covered the head of Jesus lying separately.

It is at this point that we are told, "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. "And he saw and believed" — These words are very important. They invite the question, What did he see, and what did he believe? Of course, he saw the things that were there to be seen: the linen cloths, and the inside of the tomb, in which there was no longer any corpse. But the implication is that he also saw much more than this.

Peter observed the same things, but did not grasp their significance. What the disciple saw, however, led him to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, and this means that he was the very first person to perceive what had happened to Jesus. This is really quite remarkable.

John adds the comment, "For as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead", a reference to the later Christian belief that the resurrection took place in fulfilment of OT prophesy. But without the benefit of any later hindsight, this disciple whom Jesus loved, immediately understood that Jesus had risen from the dead, and I would like to suggest that he came to this realisation because of his closeness to Jesus.

The other Gospels tell us that Jesus three times predicted his death and resurrection, but his disciples apparently utterly failed to comprehend what he was saying. However, we can suppose that the disciple whom Jesus loved had been particularly close to him, and on the Sunday morning when he saw the empty tomb, his immediate reaction was to believe that what Jesus had foretold had come to pass, and that he has risen from the dead. This disciple thus stands in stark contrast to another of Jesus's disciples, Thomas.

Later that same day when the risen Jesus began to appear to his disciples, and they told Thomas about this, since he had not been present when Jesus came, his reaction was to say, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." It was only when Jesus made another appearance eight days later, when Thomas was present, that he believed the evidence of his own eyes. Jesus responded to him with the words, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

What a contrast with the disciple whom Jesus loved! We hear again of that disciple on a later occasion when the risen Jesus again appeared to his disciples. They were fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus came and stood on the shore, but they did not recognise him, even when he spoke to them, but it was the disciple whom Jesus loved who first recognised him, and said to Peter, "It is the Lord" (21:7). It seems quite remarkable that this disciple immediately recognised Jesus, when the others, including Peter, had failed to do so.

So who, exactly was this disciple? This is not known for certain, but perhaps most scholars believe that he was John, the son of Zebedee, who seems to be claimed by the end of the Gospel of John as the author of that Gospel. For he is referred to just one more time (21:20), right at the end of John's Gospel.

Following their fishing trip, the disciples are invited by the risen Jesus to have breakfast with him. After breakfast, Jesus has a dialogue with Peter, in which three times Peter declares his love for Jesus, and Jesus apparently predicts that he will die a martyr's death, by which he will glorify God. Peter then turns as sees the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he asks, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replies, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!", words which, as John explains, some in the early church wrongly interpreted to mean that this disciple was not to die. John adds the comment, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true." Thus the authorship of John's Gospel seems to be attributed to this disciple.

A word of caution, however, needs to be entered here. John's Gospel probably originally ended at the end of chapter 20, and chapter 21 seems to be an appendix added later, whether by the author or someone else. The date and authorship of John's Gospel are not known. Nevertheless, this disciple whom Jesus loved plays an important role in the Easter story.

The Christian hope of everlasting life is a most wonderful hope for all humanity, and it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15 St Paul says, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied." And he adds, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." For our belief in the resurrection of Jesus, we necessarily depend on the testimony of those who were there at the time.

The disciple whom Jesus loved gives us his testimony of the truth of these events. On Easter Sunday morning, he looked into the empty tomb and he "saw and believed". He was later present when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples. He leaves us his testimony, so that through his eyes and in faith, we too can see and believe.

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