

GRAVE CONSEQUENCES

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John 20:1-18

Three clergy persons were having coffee and their discussion turned to the best position for prayer. As they talked, there was a telephone repairman working nearby.

"Kneeling is definitely best," claimed one.

"No," another contended. "I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven."

"You're both wrong," the third insisted. "The most effective prayer position is lying prostrate, face down on the floor."

The repairman could contain himself no longer. He said, "I hate to interrupt, but the best prayin' I ever did was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

How we look at a situation, how we interpret a situation means everything. Perspective is crucial! It is not a matter of being right or wrong, it is a matter of perspective. For example, for the organizer of the Fourth of July parade, an approaching thunderstorm is a disaster. For a farmer, however, that storm may represent salvation. Depends on how you look at it.

We see this today in the Easter story which offers not one but several interpretations of the open tomb.

The Bible tells us of Jesus, his ministry, his message of repentance. Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd, the way, the truth, the life. He is the Word made Flesh, the son of God.

Last Sunday—Palm Sunday—we observed Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He was a king, humble, and riding on a donkey. He and his disciples go to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Passover. They rent a room, gather the food, and share the meal. While at the table, Jesus announces that one of those present would betray him. Judas disappears into the night. Later, while praying in the garden, Jesus is arrested. He is taken away, beaten, tried, and executed. His body is placed into a tomb just before the start of the Sabbath at sunset. Then, early in the morning, on the first day of the week—the day following the Sabbath—while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. She sees that the stone that covered the doorway of the tomb has been moved. She doesn't need to look inside. It is obvious this grave has been desecrated, the body stolen.

Mary runs back to find Simon Peter and the other disciple and informs them, *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.* The two men immediately run to the tomb. The other disciple arrives first. He bends down to look into the tomb and sees the linen wrappings there. He does not go in.

Simon Peter arrives and he enters the tomb and he, too, sees the linen cloths in two piles, neatly rolled up. The other disciple enters, looks around, and, we are told, he *believed*. The disciples then return to Jerusalem. There is nothing more to see.

What we find so far is two different perspectives of the open grave—one of Peter and one of the other disciple. The two disciples *believe* when they exit the tomb, but we are not sure what they believe. The gospel tells us that at this point, *they did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.* Do they believe what Mary told them—that the body had been taken—or, did they believe what Jesus had said on the night of the Passover meal, that he would *conquer the world?* (16:33) It is important to note that the two said nothing and just went home.

Mary is the heart of this story. She is the first to go to the tomb to grieve over the dead Jesus. She returns after the men had left, and not knowing what to do, she stands outside the tomb weeping. Finally, she does bend down to look into the tomb and where the men had seen linen cloths, she sees two angels. The angels ask her why she is weeping and I get the feeling they ask this not out of an attempt to console her, but instead out of their incredulousness that anyone would be crying. From their perspective this is certainly not a time for tears or weeping. They know Jesus has risen.

Mary tells the angels almost exactly what she told the disciples, *They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.* Then, before the angels can respond, Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there. For some reason, however, she does not know it is Jesus. Some have suggested that her eyes were so full of tears that she could not see. Others have said that in this form Jesus looked different. But I don't think it is about Jesus. I think it is her perspective. From her perspective, this simply cannot be Jesus. Jesus is dead and his body has been stolen. It would be most logical if this were the gardener, the groundskeeper for this place. So that is what she believes.

The Gospel of John, as you know, opens with the phrase, *In the beginning was the Word.* In this John echoes the creation story of Genesis: *In the beginning God created...* The creation story also takes place in a garden. Here, at the open tomb, we find Mary talking to the caretaker of this particular garden. It is indeed a new creation.

The gardener (Jesus) asks Mary the same question asked by the angels, *Woman, why are you weeping?* And then he adds, *Whom are you looking for?* Mary

responds saying, *Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.* She still believes the body has been moved and maybe this man knows something about it.

Jesus then calls her by name, *Mary*. And that cuts through the cloud of confusion and tears and she recognizes him. She calls him *teacher, Rabbi*—a term of respect which places her in the position of being a student or disciple. Her perspective has changed. Jesus says to 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.* Mary returns to the disciples and she becomes the first resurrection evangelist when she proclaims, *I have seen the Lord.* In the first creation story, God drove Adam and Eve from the garden. In this new creation Jesus sends Mary out of the garden rejoicing. She is commissioned to tell the world that the darkness has not won, that the darkness has not overcome the Word made flesh.

The question for us all—on this Easter Sunday—as we contemplate the open, empty grave of Jesus, is What is our perspective? How do we see the tomb? Is it empty because of a misappropriated corpse, or is it empty because the Lord is risen? If it is the first, then we can go home at the end of the service—nothing to see here. Jesus is gone. Yes, he did some amazing things, he undeniably was a great prophet and a righteous man of God. He told wonderful stories. Now it is over.

But, on the other hand, if we see the tomb as empty because the Lord is risen then we are talking about the re-ordering of reality itself. Easter is about more than a simple resurrection. Scripture shows us plenty of other resurrections. Jesus raised Lazarus, and Jairus' daughter, and the widow's son. The Old Testament tells of several resurrections, including Elijah raising the son of the widow. In the New Testament, Peter raises Tabitha from the dead and Paul raises a young man named Eutychus. Easter is more than the resurrection. It is more than eternal life or heavenly life. Easter is about God stirring the kettle of creation in order to show God's love for us, to show God's desire to be in relationship with us. To do so, God is willing to move heaven and earth. Easter is the triumph of God over evil. As the Apostle Paul writes, *everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new* (2 Cor 5:17).

My prayer is that you see the empty tomb as the hand of God, not the work of people. That you will rejoice and celebrate this great gift of all that is new, of all that is God's.