



Women at The Tomb-Painting by Graham Braddock

12 April 2020, Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Show us POWER

First Mennonite Church

It's hard to believe that today is Easter, because Covid-19 prevents us from worshipping together. It's also hard to believe that it's spring as we are still trudging through snow in the frigid cold. Since we celebrate Easter in spring, Christians have made some interesting comparisons between springtime and the resurrection of Jesus. For instance, resurrection means new life; springtime is when things come to life.

- A caterpillar weaves a cocoon in fall, and in spring bursts forth from the cocoon

as a butterfly. The resurrection is like that.

- Rabbits, while not a Christian symbol, have been known since ancient times as symbols of fertility. You know, one day you have two rabbits, the next day you got thirty! Fertility is like the power of life over death. Some Christians have said, the resurrection is like that. Chocolatiers took the rabbit idea, encased it in chocolate, and made a fortune!
- And what about the ever-popular Easter egg? It has been a symbol of spring since ancient times. Christians adopted the egg as a symbol of renewed life. Think about it. A fertilized egg, while it may seem to be dead, develops, and after a few weeks a little chick burst forth from its encased shell. A chick breaking out of the egg—some Christians have said that it's just like Jesus bursting forth out of the tomb.

But there is a difference, isn't there? We know that springtime means that the sun's rays are getting stronger because the earth is tilting in such a way that more direct sunlight hits our part of the world. When spring comes the weather warms—except

here in Saskatoon—and some absolutely miraculous things happen! Trees bud, flowers bloom, and grass turns green. This is the natural way of things. This is how it's been for billions of years. Seemingly dead, shrivelled, wrinkled seeds, then shoots, growth, and wonderful colour. Eggs, fertilized, cell growth, chicken foetuses, and then the chick pops out of the egg, only to find themselves in tossed into a baking pan with some carrots and potatoes for Easter dinner!

Spring. Flowers bloom, green grass, trees bud... A miraculous season of new life. It's only natural for us to think about new life at springtime. But let's be perfectly clear. This is not resurrection!

My father died when I lived in China. When I returned to Canada, I went to the funeral home and saw him in the coffin. He was still and cold. At the graveside some words were said and we put him into the ground and spent some time throwing dirt onto the coffin. My dad wasn't seemingly dead like the egg before a chick comes out of it. He wasn't going to open his eyes and start breathing again. We said our good-byes, buried him, and then went back to the church to eat.

This is how it is with life, friends. We are born. We live. Grow old and then we die. This is natural and predictable. There is NO springtime with death.

Springtime happens ON graves not IN them.

Some of the gospels say that on the first day of the week, some women went to the tomb with spices so they could embalm Jesus' body. In John's gospel there is only one woman who goes to the tomb early on the first day of the week. The gospel of John doesn't tell us why Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. It only tells us that she was the first one there. Do you know why she went to the tomb?

You may recall that none of Jesus' followers understood what happened when Jesus died. Though Jesus warned them that he must die, they hadn't believed him. Look back to last Sunday, Palm Sunday. A mere seven days ago, there were jubilant crowds shouting, "*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*" The next minute these same people shouted crucify him! One of them betrayed Jesus to the authorities. The rest of the disciples deserted him. The sudden trial before the Sanhedrin—followed by a trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Everyone, including the disciples were blinded by their own false expectations for who a Messiah was and what the Messiah would do.

With great haste Jesus was hung on the cross, while a group of women followers stood by the cross weeping. Within a few hours, Jesus was dead.

This was not what the disciples expected. Their master, whom they had come to believe was the Messiah sent by God for the salvation of all people, had been unceremoniously put to death as a common criminal and laid in a tomb. If you watched our Good Friday service, you noted that at the end of the service, we extinguished the Christ candle and then removed it from the sanctuary as a symbolic way of saying, so much for God's plan. So much for hope. Death, still undefeated, reigns supreme.

That was it. The movement that Jesus had begun, the one the disciples hoped would grow and spread, was over. Failure. Hopes dashed. A crisis of faith. Nothing left to do but return to the fishing boats, and fear for their safety—after all, they had been Jesus' accomplices, and the authorities knew that.

The reason Mary went to the tomb that one day was not to check to see if Jesus was alive, but so she could carry out the necessary Jewish rituals for a recently deceased person. What more could she do? A year or so after we buried my dad, we had a headstone placed by his grave. Several members of the family were there and held a very nice memorial service; we didn't go to see if he was alive. The same with Mary...Jesus was dead, and there was nothing more she could do, but to pay her respects, carry out prescribed rituals, remember him as he used to be, and weep over his passing.

But then as the sky lightens and darkness gives way to shadows, and shadows to sight—the stone. The great huge stone in front of the entrance of the tomb, the stone that wasn't there to keep a dead body inside, but meant to keep grave robbers at bay, wasn't up against the tomb entrance. The stone was rolled away, and the dead lifeless body was nowhere to be found. An empty tomb.

Mary ran back to tell Peter and the other disciple the news. She didn't tell them that Jesus was alive at first, but said, *'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'* Peter and the other disciple then ran to the tomb, not because they believed Mary's story, but because they didn't. They didn't believe what a lowly woman told them; they had to find out for themselves. When it says, the other disciple believed, it doesn't mean they believed that Jesus was alive, but rather the other disciple actually believed Mary. What did the male

disciples do with this information? John's gospel is kind—it says, they returned to their homes. The male disciples left, but she stayed, fixed in her grief, weeping at this final outrage. Where have they taken the body of Jesus?

There was Mary standing outside the tomb weeping. Mary knew very well that dead bodies don't disappear. Nor do they rise; they stay dead. If the body was gone, then someone had to have taken it away. This is how things are in the world. How is Mary going to find the body of Jesus?

Then she hears her name being called. "Mary." The unthinkable, illogical, unnatural, incredible breaks in. The one who was dead, laid in the tomb, now greets her, calling her by name.

But Mary doesn't understand. She takes this one who speaks to be the gardener. She pleads, "*Tell me, where have you laid him and I will take him away.*" She wants Jesus' body that she might do the proper, conventional, respectful thing for his corpse.

Yet the voice of Jesus has called to her from beyond the grave back to where Mary lives. Like the voice that shatters glass, the voice of Jesus has shattered Mary's world, called her forward to new possibilities, to a new future. God's future.

Through this encounter Mary now is able to tell others, "*I have seen the Lord.*" She has moved beyond her preoccupation with the corpse to an encounter with the risen Christ. What made sense before, the fact that the dead do not rise from the dead is replaced with something bigger, something we call faith. She has been encountered by God's POWER, by a living Lord who is on the move and will not allow death to hold him back.

As I read this story, I couldn't help but wonder what actually happened at that lonely grave so long ago? To be perfectly honest, I'm not at all sure. This was an event that nobody actually saw, so the details of Jesus' resurrection are shrouded in the mists of history. Read the different gospel accounts of the resurrection, and be amazed by how different they are from each other.

While it's hard to know exactly what happened so long ago, we do know that something profound happened. For one, we have a great deal of history to deal with. Those very first witnesses to the empty tomb and the encounter with Jesus believed what they had experienced. They had faith. From their faith came a group

of believers, the Church. From the faith of the Christians in the church came the testimony to what they had seen and heard. We find their testimony in the books that comprise the New Testament. The church today, you and me, stand as a visible testimony to their witness. Frederick Buechner, in his book *Listening to your Life*, put it this way: “Unless something very real took place on that strange, confused morning so long ago, there would be no Christian faith, no church, no New Testament.” The apostle Paul said much of the same thing in 1 Corinthians: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17 NRSV).

Second, the resurrection is not simply the resuscitation of the dead body of Jesus: the resurrection is a concrete sign for how God will bring about a new creation. As Paul says, the resurrection of Jesus is the “first fruits” (1 Cor. 15:23 NRSV) of what God plans to do in all creation, transforming the rocks, birds, plants, you and me until the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). The resurrection of Jesus is the opening salvo, the first act in God’s grand comedy of re-creation, of bringing about a new heaven and a new earth.

Third, and this is related to my second point, is that something profound also happened to those first witnesses. They were changed forever. The gospel of John tells us that Mary had gone to the tomb to simply pay her respects to a dead body...a natural thing to do. She went to the tomb as a person, who, during those days couldn't be a witness to anything. In the culture of that day, women were considered property of the man. Women, could not give public witness. But through this encounter Mary went away changed. Jesus gave her the authority to tell, to be a witness to what she had seen and heard. “I have seen the Lord...” she said. Unfortunately, over the centuries, the church, with its male-dominated leadership, has tried to forget this point.

It's hard to know exactly what happened at the tomb so long ago. Something happened that went way beyond the natural, the everyday. As I’ve already said, the New Testament writers described the resurrection in terms of God's victory over death. They described it in terms of a new creation.

To describe the resurrection in terms of the coming of spring after a long cold winter...apple trees blooming, chicks hatching from eggs...really doesn't do it, doesn't capture how profoundly the world changed that first Easter morn. Springtime is natural and predictable. A person dying is a natural event. But having a dead person rise from the dead, well, that's goes way beyond the Easter bunny, or

cholesterol rich chocolate Easter eggs, doesn't it?

The first witnesses to the resurrection didn't explain or describe the resurrection. They simply proclaimed it as fact. "Christ is risen!" We may try to explain the resurrection in terms of the coming of spring, new life on a seemingly dead earth, or in terms of the rebirth of hope in a despairing world. Don't get me wrong. I love spring, other than it takes so long to actually get here. **But springtime isn't the resurrection.** The resurrection is foundational. It is the basis of our faith. Without it there is no New Testament, no Christian faith, and no church. Our faith, the faith of our ancestors is linked up with the conviction that Jesus rose from the dead. Without it, we can say with the apostle Paul: "If Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so is our faith."

Please don't misunderstand me; I'm not against Easter eggs or chocolate rabbits. My waistline is visible testimony to my love for good chocolate, especially dark chocolate.

What I'm trying to say is we must be clear on what we believe to be true. The earliest Christians believed that Jesus Christ was killed and buried. But God **showed us POWER** by raising Jesus from the dead. The resurrection totally revolutionized people lives, turned them and their world upside down. You are watching this virtually because you believe that to be true. And this, friends, is what the Easter story is all about. Amen