



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**EASTER
DAY**

MARCH 31, 2024

A Meditation on Jesus' Death by the Rev. James J. Popham

Something happened in the darkness that preceded the dawn of that Easter morning. Something happened that was unexpected. Something happened that was unprecedented. Something happened that was incomprehensible, even to Mary Magdalene, who was so traumatized at first glance, she failed to recognize Jesus.

Something happened that was – and is – too good to believe. And for many, is too hard to believe. Yet, something happened that is neither fanciful nor metaphorical. Something happened that is historical and factual.

“Something happened” that gives us reason to be here this Easter morning 2000 years later. Something happened that is being celebrated by two billion followers of Christ in every land and nation on Earth today. Something happened that we as Episcopalians celebrate every Sunday in our distinctive sacramental way.

And we do so not because we need or want to believe Jesus was raised from the dead, but because the evidence proffered in the words of Scripture leave no other conclusion defensible. Our reading from the Gospel according to John this morning is a compelling example of storytelling designed to lead the reader to trust that Jesus was, indeed, raised from the dead.

We might ask, are we preaching to the choir? But, my dear friends in Christ, we live in a culture in which the choir is getting smaller every day. Less than half of the people in this country attend church of any kind on a regular basis.¹ Less than half.

So many people today are disenchanted, disconnected, disinterested, or outright disdainful of not only Christianity, but any organized religion. That includes those whom we have not seen since Christmas and will not see

¹ Gallup poll: More than half of Americans rarely go to church, Religious News Service, March 26, 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/gallup-poll-more-than-half-of-americans-rarely-go-to-church/ar-BB1kw8h7> (accessed March 31, 2024).

again until next Christmas. This may sound judgmental or critical, but what it really is ... is an acknowledgement that we as a Church have failed.

How many of us could dissuade a skeptic that the resurrection we celebrate today is no first century conspiracy theory run amuck? Could we explain how even the Gospel reading this morning offers substantial evidence for the resurrection? That it really happened. Here are a few clues that appear largely meaningless out of context in our 21st century, but would have been very persuasive to a first century audience.

First, John reports that

[T]he cloth that had been on Jesus' head, [was] not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

Just that level of detail can demonstrate the veracity and accuracy of a story.

But just as an aside, can you imagine how Mary Jesus' mother would have reacted when she heard that? "Wish he had been that neat when he was a teenager."

At the same time, leaving anything neatly rolled hardly was the behavior of a grave robber – something relatively common at that time, as Mary Magdalene suspected at first. And John would have been anxious to refute that expected claim.

Second, Mary Magdalene's prominent role in the story also is telling. Earlier that morning Mary Magdalene, Peter, and his companion went to the tomb where Jesus' dead body had been laid. It was a morning dark in every sense of the word. The sun had yet to rise. Jesus, the popular teacher, healer, prophet, and miracle worker, the Jesus they were convinced was the longed-for Messiah, had been crucified as an insurrectionist by the Romans.

Now Jesus' disciples were in hiding, fearing for their own lives. And their own hearts were laden with the regret of their cowardly abandonment of Jesus as he was tried and convicted and sentenced to crucifixion. Their minds and memories were so unraveled by the events of the previous Friday that upon seeing the empty tomb, all they could do was go home. Except Mary Magdalene. Somehow in her heart, in her grief, in her love of Jesus, she had the intuition that something happened that morning.

Sadly, she must have used the same publicist as poor "doubting" Thomas, the star of next week's Gospel reading. Because history has been unkind to

Mary, who is remembered wrongly as a “professional.” And we all know what we mean by that.

But just as Thomas was the first person to acknowledge explicitly Jesus as “Lord and God,” Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. This was the Mary Magdalene, who had remained near the cross with Jesus’ mother and John, who also had come with Peter to the tomb. Mary Magdalene, who jumped to the obvious conclusion that Jesus’ body had been removed from the tomb for no good purpose and only wanted to know where it had been taken. Mary Magdalene who still must have considered his resurrection so inconceivable that she did not even recognize Jesus, thinking him to be a gardener. But also the Mary Magdalene, who had supported and traveled with Jesus. Mary Magdalene, who would be rightly remembered in the Church’s tradition as not only equal to the apostles, but also an “apostle to the apostles.”² Mary Magdalene who would be marginalized and slandered by patriarchal - male - church historians centuries ago, but who would play the leading role in one of the most poignant and profound scenes in all of Scripture, when Jesus calls her by name in the garden, and she finally recognizes him, “rabbouni.”

That any woman, much less Mary Magdalene, was the first to report the empty tomb and the first to recognize Jesus after his resurrection would have been preposterous in the first century, and the credibility of the author and the veracity of his story would have been demolished. Women typically were lightly regarded and even were forbidden to testify in court. The only reason anyone would have placed women in a prominent role in the story was because that was the truth. Or as we often say in the current vernacular, “You cannot make this stuff up.”

The bodily appearance of someone who had been crucified after their death falls in the same category. At the time of Christ, when someone died, they were dead. Period. Full stop. But Jesus was now alive after just a few days of being dead. Indeed, the Greek word they used for resurrection, *anastasis*, referred to someone who was bodily dead, but then discovered to be bodily

² “Mary Magdalene, Saint,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/mary-magdalene-saint/> (accessed March 25, 2024).

alive.³ But the Pagans denied even the possibility of resurrection, and only some Jews considered it even a distant hope for the future.⁴

And yet Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and then to others not in some ethereal ghost-like form, which they would have understood, but in a tangible bodily form, and then only days after his death. Again, it was so outlandish, so beyond the boundaries of human understanding, no one could make up a story like that. It could only be true. Again, you can't make that stuff up.

That the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a demonstrable fact has staggering implications for us.:

We know we can bear the darkness, because we know now nothing can dim the light.

We know we can love with abandon, because we know now that we never will be abandoned by a loving God.

We know we can love our neighbors as ourselves, because we know now that we ourselves are loved beyond measure by a gracious God.

We know we can look Jesus in the eye because we know now we have nothing to fear but transformation.

We know we can establish the Kingdom of God on earth because we know now when we pray "thy kingdom come," it will.

We know we can confront evil, because we know now that evil will not prevail.

We know we can confront death, because we know now that death is not final.

All because...Something happened.

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

He is risen, indeed.

Alleluia.

³Tish Harrison Warren, "Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?", *New York Times*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/09/opinion/jesus-rise-from-the-dead-easter.html?searchResultPosition=9> (accessed April 11, 2013).

⁴N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Fortress Press, 2003. p. 31.