

The Resurrection Happened in a Cemetery

Sermon for Easter Sunday

Sermon Text: John 20:11-18



But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹²And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid

Him.” ¹⁴Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that He had said these things to her.

When Mary Magdalene stood in front of Jesus’ tomb, she had exactly 60 seconds to realize what more than 60 generations of people would believe and confess after her – our Lord Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Yet we are still learning what it means that Jesus is alive and risen from the dead. Who was this Mary Magdalene who said the word “Rabboni” to Jesus in the garden? Mary Magdalene had a long history; she knew what wickedness was. She had been plagued by seven demons. Then she met Jesus and He showed her what it meant to be free, to be truly free. That’s why she was so close to Him and listened to His words often and gladly. These words were a particular comfort to her as she made her way to His tomb. Jesus, who had so emphatically said that our God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living, must now be with this living God, she thought. That was comforting to her. But she was torn, what if it wasn’t true? The events of Good Friday were still firmly fixed in her mind. Not even in her worst nightmares, when she was possessed by demons, could she have imagined such a thing. She would never have thought that her Lord would die so miserably. Burned into her memory was the hatred of the people, Jesus’ cruel execution, as well as the helplessness of their Lord. Jesus, who had powerfully raised Lazarus from the dead, had to taste death Himself. She couldn’t comprehend it any longer. The fragrant oils she had brought with her to His tomb would hardly be able to soothe the deep wounds in her heart, let alone heal the deep wounds on the body of her beloved Jesus. She took a deep breath and a heart-rending sob escaped her. As she wiped her eyes, she saw an unexpected sight: the stone in front of Jesus’ tomb was gone! No, she thought, they wouldn’t go that far? But the wickedness of man knew no bounds. It was just as she had feared: they had taken the body of her Lord. Deeply weighed down, she sat on a rock next to the tomb and wept bitterly. The resurrection of Jesus takes place in a cemetery – a place of hopelessness and where people say a final goodbye as well as a place of doubt and contemplation. What did they do with Jesus’ body? Was it stolen? Or did the pharisees and scribes take it away? People’s callousness truly has no limit. Not even in death do they leave the Lord in peace. To this day, Easter and Jesus’ resurrection take place against a backdrop of sadness, hopelessness, and doubt. And in this setting, people have been asking themselves for centuries: what actually happened? Why is Jesus’ tomb empty? For centuries there have been attempts to explain this, like Mary Magdalene did at first. Bertolt Brecht rejected these attempts and said that Jesus hadn’t really risen from the dead. Like Mary, he suspected there was some human conspiracy in the background. The exegete Rudolf Bultmann had a much more sophisticated explanation and said that Jesus hadn’t been raised physically but that Jesus had been raised through His words.

But what needs to happen for grief and hopelessness to be truly transformed into Easter joy and resurrection faith? We must go back to Mary Magdalene. Sobbing and caught up in disbelief and doubt, she sat beside the tomb. Before her was profound grief, and the wickedness of man had ripped the ground from beneath her feet. And then they came. First the angels, then the Lord Himself. At first, she didn’t recognize Him at all and thought He was a gardener. She was so close to the Lord and yet so far. It was only when the Lord addressed her directly that the “scales fell from her eyes.” “Mary.” “Rabboni.” When she spoke to Him, her eyes were opened. Everything came back in a flash, His words that He had said over and over again: “I must be

put to death and after three days I will rise again.” It was all so difficult to understand at the time. But now when He said “Mary,” her eyes were opened and she saw Him as He always was, she knew Him, and saw that He was alive! For Mary Magdalene, this day was as if the demons had left her again. Suddenly, she was close to the Lord again and she knew without any doubt that everything would be alright after all! We can recognize the same pattern from the various Easter stories: first there is sadness and hopelessness and then the Lord opens His mouth and speaks to the people. Only then is the cemetery, the sadness, and the unbelief transformed into living Easter faith. This is how it was for the disciples on the road to Emmaus and for Thomas and the same goes for Peter, of whom the Lord directly asked three times: “Do you love Me?” or for Paul when Jesus addressed him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Let’s now look at Parvane from Leipzig who is celebrating Easter today. From her earliest memories, she knows that Christians celebrate Easter with chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs. Anyone can see all of this on T.V. On Easter 2025, Parvane walked around Leipzig and saw the same things hanging in all of the stores, just as she had seen these things on T.V. when she was a child. The brightly colored Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies aren’t just pretty to look at, they were also really yummy. There were many other delicious things to eat in the city and everyone was happy – almost like at Christmas. Yet, the happy faces couldn’t affect Parvane. She was deeply sad. She had to flee to Germany and now everyone in her home country knew about her escape so there was no going back. Then came the terrible news from home. Her uncle was arrested and has since disappeared. She was scared looking at the pictures. Then came the terrible news of his death in prison. What would happen to his family? Would she ever see her little cousins again? Who would take care of the funeral? With all these fears and questions, she lay crying in the arms of a friend. “Let’s go to church in the morning!” Parvane’s friend, Salina, suggested. Maybe that’s a good idea, Parvane thought. Parvane knew that Easter had to mean more than just the Easter Bunny and chocolate. “Maybe something to do with spring and nature awakening...” she thought. “Alright, I need comfort and something nice,” she said. At church, the pastor kept saying the word *resurrection* – resurrection from winter, resurrection from a marriage crisis, resurrection from depression, resurrection from a financial crisis, resurrection after being bullied by others, resurrection after being fired at work. Parvane couldn’t completely understand or comprehend why one had to be resurrected after all these things and didn’t know why it was important to do so. But then she heard a part of the service that stuck with her. The pastor loudly and joyfully chanted: “He is risen!” and the congregation immediately responded: “He is risen indeed!” Parvane saw Jesus at the front of the church on the altar and thought that this was who it was all about. He was still hanging on the cross. Anyone who is killed like that is truly dead. There’s no way around it. Parvane already suspected that resurrection can only be truly wonderful when someone is truly quite dead and suddenly comes back to life. Now He is resurrected, truly resurrected. Parvane marveled at this word for a long time. She also saw her friend wipe a tear from her cheek. “Why are you crying, Salina?” Parvane wanted to know. “Because I just realized what Easter really means...” replied Salina.

What do Parvane, Mary Magdalene, and Salina have in common? It is this – they celebrate Easter and the Lord speaks to *them*: Mary, Salina, Parvane, whatever they may be called. Easter can only be celebrated when all human doubts, explanation attempts, and grief are put aside and the Lord Himself speaks to us through His word and through His Spirit. Now the question is, what happens next. Mary was initially overwhelmed with joy. She thought that everything would be the same again: she would sit at the table with Jesus and hear Him speak. With tears of joy, she wanted to embrace her Lord but He had to rebuke her. She would be connected to Jesus but not as before. Jesus had indeed risen bodily, the body that had been tortured on the cross and laid in the tomb now stood before her as the Risen One. The final connection with our Lord would only be in heaven. Until then, faith in Jesus’ work would connect us to Him. Until then, His words and Spirit would create this faith in us.

“Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe,” Jesus told Thomas. Yes, over 2,000 years later this has still not changed. The power of death is still overwhelming and comes to us all. Death... Mary, Parvane, and Salina all struggle with this powerful opponent and they all have ridiculously pointless weapons in their hands. Mary had just expensive oil and Parvane had Easter eggs and the Easter Bunny. Of course, these remedies can do nothing against death. Both are left weeping and powerless against death’s power. In a situation like this, there can be no other way than for death to win. After all, death moves closer and closer to us year after year. It is death who, when it draws a line, shows who really has the last word. Yes, when the dead lie in their final

resting place, there are no words left. All you can do is go deep into yourself and sink into grief and sorrow. The more we sink into such sorrow and grief, the more we see only ourselves: our own sin, our own weakness, our own death.

Easter means opening our eyes and seeing the Lord. And not only seeing Him but also listening to Him. In 60 seconds, Mary understood it – it is the Lord! Mary was able to grasp in 60 seconds what Christian generations couldn't grasp after more than 2,000 years, because the Lord Himself broke through the boundary of life and death, because the Lord Himself crossed the border between our sin, death, and heaven, and because Jesus Himself calls into our world: "Mary, Yes, Mary... I mean you! I call you out of death!" Just one word from our Lord is enough to make the scales fall from her eyes. This one word is enough, Mary understood it – it is truly the Lord. He is risen, just as He said. This one word was the reason for Mary's faith and mission. Jesus' statement shows in a remarkable way how Jesus is in His church at the same time. He says: "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God." The remarkable thing is that Jesus solemnly declares here that His Father is our Father and His God is our God. Now we and Jesus have the same Father. We belong to one family. We are brothers and sisters and are constantly locked in the Father's heart in everything that happens to us here. And just like Jesus, we are also included in His resurrection. That is the miracle we believe in at Easter. Amen.