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"He Is Risen!"
John 20:1-18 Colossians 3:1-4

PRAYER OF PRAISE

This is the day of gladness and rejoicing. You cause new life to burst forth with great beauty and fragrance. You adorn the creation with splendor and grandeur. You give our people a taste of your righteousness and we worship you. We give you all our thanks and praise. All glory be to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 20:1-18

Last Thursday night we left this room in silence. This morning we shout for joy! This morning we celebrate the rest of the story. Hear the word of the Lord from John 20:1-18

Let us pray. Dear Lord open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our hearts to feel your love. Open our souls to sense your touch. Open our minds to receive your word. Amen.

A Sunday School teacher had just finished telling her third graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing off the only way in or out. Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, and the surprise of Easter morning, she asked: "And what do you think were Jesus' first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive."

A hand shot up into the air from the rear of the classroom. It belonged to a most excited little girl. Leaping out of her chair she shouted out excitedly, "I know, I know, I know."

Extending her arms high in the air she sang out: " TA - DAA!"

According to John's gospel, the first words Jesus spoke were, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"

A woman named Mary was there when Jesus came forth from the womb. And a woman named Mary was there when Jesus came forth from the tomb. From womb to tomb there was a Mary.

There is no record that Jesus ever visited Mary's home town of Magdala. But he did visit the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). Simon probably lived in Capernaum, which was not far from Magdala. While Jesus was visiting Simon's house, a woman brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood at Jesus' feet weeping, began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she stooped down and wiped his feet with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Jesus said to this woman, "Your sins are forgiven." The reason that some think this woman may have been Mary Magdalene is that immediately after describing the scene at Simon's house Luke tells us about those who followed Jesus. He says that there were the disciples, of course, but also a group of women who, he says, "had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities." He names them and the first name he mentions is Mary Magdalene. These women, says Luke, were helping to support Jesus and the disciples out of their own means.

We pay so much attention to the twelve men who follow Jesus, but it is these relatively unknown women who are paying the bills. Can I get an Amen ladies?

In Jesus' day, a woman's testimony was considered inferior to a man's and was inadmissible in a Jewish court of law. Some say this is a critical piece verifying Jesus' resurrection. If the disciples wanted to invent a story about Jesus' resurrection and they wanted it to be believed they certainly would not have had a woman to be the first to tell it.

On the day that Jesus was crucified. All but one of the men, John, deserted Jesus and fled, but not the women. On the morning of the third day Mary came to the tomb. It was still dark, but she could see that the stone was rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. Not knowing what had happened or what to do she ran from the tomb to the place where the disciples were and told Peter and John, what she had found Peter and John ran to the tomb and John says, "I got there first."

Isn't that like us guys? Jesus rises from the dead and John reports who won the race. He got there first but he was too scared to go in. When Peter arrives he goes in, and when John sees that Peter didn't die, he gathers the courage to go in. They see the grave clothes but no body. and so....they go home. They go home? What? Mary is left alone at the tomb.

Ever since Genesis chapter 3, Eve has taken the fall for the Fall. But here, it is a woman who is faithful and the men who fail. Here in Jesus' resurrection, the Fall is reversed. Augustine said "Eve announced death to her husband, and the women in the church announced salvation to the men. (Someone has suggested that maybe women should be meeting to debate whether men should be ordained!)

Why do I believe that he is risen? I believe in resurrection because somebody told me about it. Somebody told me about it because Mary Magdalene told Peter and John. Peter and John told somebody about it. At one point 500 people experienced the risen Christ and they told somebody about it.

A first year student in a Catholic seminary was told by the dean that he should plan to preach the sermon in chapel the following day. He had never preached a sermon before, he was nervous and afraid, and he stayed up all night, but in the morning, he didn't have a sermon. He stood in the pulpit, looked out at his

classmates and said "Do you know what I am going to say?" All of them shook their heads "no" and he said "Neither do I. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The dean was not happy. "I'll give you another chance tomorrow, and you had better have a sermon." Again he stayed up all night; and again he couldn't come up with a sermon. Next morning, he stood in the pulpit and asked "Do you know what I am going to say?" The students all nodded their heads "yes." "Then there is no reason to tell you" he said. "The service has ended. Go in peace."

Now the dean was angry. "I'll give you one more chance; if you don't have a sermon tomorrow, you will be asked to leave the seminary." Again, no sermon came. He stood in the pulpit the next day and asked "Do you know what I am going to say?" Half of the students nodded "yes" and the other half shook their heads "no." The student preacher then announced "Those who know, tell those who don't know. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The seminary dean walked over to the student, put his arm over the student's shoulders, and said "Those who know, tell those who don't know. Today, the gospel has been proclaimed."

The truth of the matter is that most of what we know is simply because somebody told us about it. How do you know that a man has walked on the moon? Were you standing there to meet him when he stepped off? No you believe it because someone told you about it. Yet, there are people to this day who insist that it was all done in a fake TV studio down in Hollywood.

We have far more historical proof of the resurrection than we do thousands of pieces of information which we routinely accept as fact every single day. There is more documented evidence that Jesus Christ rose from the dead than there is that Julius Caesar ever lived. There is more evidence of the resurrection than there is that Alexander the Great died at age 33.

I have always found it interesting that some will accept thousands of facts for which there are only shreds of evidence, but in the face of overwhelming evidence of the resurrection they remain skeptical.

After Jesus was buried, Pontius Pilate ordered a Roman guard placed around the tomb. Such a guard usually consisted of 16 men. Four soldiers would have been placed immediately in front of the tomb, with the other 12 sleeping in a semicircle in front of them. The guards changed shifts every four hours. These soldiers were elite, the most highly trained fighting force in the world. The penalty for failure to guard a prisoner or for falling asleep on duty was death (sometimes they were burned alive in a fire made from their own clothes). Believe me, these soldiers had every reason to stay wide awake. No one could have gotten past them to steal the body from the tomb. The fact that the guards were allowed to live so they could be bribed to tell the lie that the body had been stolen was not

lost on many. They had to explain why they were not executed for losing a dead body.

Frank Morrison calls the stone "the one silent and infallible witness to the whole episode." The stone was of enormous size and doubtless weighed over two tons. It was so heavy that the women who came on Sunday morning knew they couldn't move it. Once rolled into place, it took three or four men to move it. The gospels also tell us that the soldiers sealed the tomb, which meant that they stretched a cord over the rock and fastened it at either end with a sealing compound. Then they stamped it with the seal of the Roman governor. The penalty for breaking the seal was death. This again argues against any attempt to steal the body.

Both Luke and John comment on the condition of the wrappings in the tomb. They found the linen wrapping sheets still in place with the cloth that covered the face folded to the side. Evidently the resins had hardened into the shape of Jesus' body, leaving the appearance of a cocoon after the butterfly has escaped. How do you explain that? Grave robbers would have taken the body without unwrapping it or they would have unwrapped it and thrown the winding sheets to the side. No one steals a body and then rewraps the grave clothes in the shape of the person that used to be inside them. I believe that when Jesus rose from the dead he rose through the wrappings leaving behind them just as John and Peter found them. The stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out, but so that Peter and John and Mary could get in and see that he had gotten out...that he had risen.

When Peter and John left Mary at the tomb she gathered the courage to look inside and saw two angels. When she turned to go she saw someone she supposed to be gardener. But when she heard him call her by name she knew it was her Lord. The first appearance of the resurrected Christ—was made to a woman who didn't give up...who didn't go home....who took a second look.

You probably do not know the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. During his day Nikolai was as powerful a man as there was on earth. He was a Russian Communist leader who took part in the Bolshevik Revolution 1917. He was the editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, which by the way means Truth. He was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today.

There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

After an hour of his lecturing Bukharin looked out at what seemed to him to be the smoldering ashes of men's faith and he demanded, "Are there any questions?"

Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!" 1)

Perhaps you are standing today at the tomb of a dead relationship, or of dead hopes and dreams. Maybe you have suffered a severe disappointment. You've tried to get your life together, but you've found nothing but failure and frustration. You may be about to give up. Listen! Don't give up. Don't give up. Jesus is calling you by name.

Chances are you are here because you are one of those who have heard the call. You are one of the ones who know. Just for practice turn to someone near you and say, "He is risen." Now, someone has told you. Go and tell others. Be the reason that others hear their name called. The gospel has been proclaimed. Go and proclaim it even more. "He is risen." (He is risen indeed!)

Let's pray.

Dear Lord, we give you thanks that in Christ you reveal to us your Word. As prophets listened to your voice, make us likewise attentive to the Word that took on flesh and blood, and has empowered us to speak the truth of your love.

We give you thanks that in Christ Jesus you have opened the way for all to approach you in prayer. We yearn for the day when all that we do will be in praise of your name. As we respond to his call may our conviction breed courage and our charity challenge others to approach you as well. We pray for those in need and for those who lead. Give those in need strength and hope. Give those who lead wisdom and courage.

Thank you for the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene. Thank you that she didn't give up too soon. Thank you that she ran to tell the news ...twice. Give us feet that run to tell to others that need to hear that you have risen...that you have risen indeed! Amen.

1. Why I Believe In The Resurrection, by Brett Blair ChristianGlobe Network,
2. Four Truths and a Lie, by Steven Molin ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.