

Easter Sunrise Service
Sermon Series: Rhythms
God's Symphony by Jeff McClain
John 20:1-18

Boone UMC
March 27, 2016

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.
2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." *3* Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.
4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.
5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.
6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, *7* and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. *8* Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; *9* for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. *10* Then the disciples returned to their homes.

The word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

There's a worship service every Wednesday afternoon at Appalachian Brian Estates, an independent living center here in Boone. George Naff leads it most weeks, but I fill in for him once a month. I bring my trumpet, and we start the service by singing hymns together. I always ask for requests, and every time I've been there over the past four years, we've always started in the same place: hymn number 428. In the Garden, the hymn we just sang. The reason we start there is because that's Marge's favorite, and she's not bashful about letting everyone know. Every time I reassure her it's a great place to start because the most significant moments in the bible happened in a garden – from the Garden of Eden to Garden of Gethsemane to the garden outside the empty tomb.

The hymn writer Austin Miles had an interesting experience that led him to write "In the Garden" in 1912.¹ He was an amateur photographer, and he loved reading the bible in his dark room where he could clear out all distractions. One day he was reading from John 20, and he suddenly felt he was transported into the scene of the text, right alongside Mary Magdalene as she discovered the open tomb and later encountered Jesus there. As I was thinking and praying earlier this week about how to proclaim the good news at this sunrise service, I felt God's Spirit

¹ From Robert Morgan's *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*, p. 271.

suggesting we meditate on this word in the same way Austin Miles had...that we place ourselves in the garden alongside Mary, the first apostle. A couple days later I came across the perfect text to facilitate our meditation – the words of contemporary bible scholar NT Wright.² So now I invite you to relax, maybe even close your eyes as we are led by the Spirit into the garden with Tom Wright's reflection on John chapter 20.

“Darkness on the face of the deep. The formless beginning, the chaos. The void. The beginning. The wind and the word. God's breath, God's speech, summoning things never known before. Life and light. The first day. Creation.

In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh. The flesh has spoken, breathed, brought life and light. New creation has spilled out around him wherever he has gone. ‘Here's the man!’ [see John 19:5]. The sixth day. Creation is complete. God saw all he had made, and it was very good.

Flesh dies. Chaos comes again. Darkness descends on the little weeping group at the cross. Two men in the fading light do what has to be done. Then the long sabbath, the rest in the cold tomb.

And now, still in the darkness, the first day of the week. The new week. The new creation. The eighth day. Eyes red from weeping and sleepless sabbath nights. Women at the tomb; perhaps to bring more spices, perhaps just to weep, perhaps just to be there, because there was nowhere else to be, nothing else to do, nothing else that mattered, that would ever matter...

For the moment, the empty tomb is simply another twist of the knife. Chaos upon chaos. Someone's taken him away. No faith, no hope, no ‘maybe after all...’. Just a cruel trick. Some gardener, some labourer, some soldier, someone's servant. But we must find out. It's urgent. She [Mary] runs back into the city, back to Peter and his hiding place, back to the young lad she had stood with by the cross, the one Jesus specially loved.

They run, too. The younger man gets there first. Sure enough, the tomb is open and empty. And here's a curious thing: there are the linen cloths, lying there. Someone has not only taking the body away; they have first gone to the trouble of *unwrapping* it. Why on earth would you do that? Where has that happened before?

Peter, out of breath, arrives at the tomb a few moments later. He acts in character: no waiting, no beating about the bush, no shall-we-shan't-we. In he goes. And here's an even more curious thing: the linen cloths are lying there; but the single cloth, the napkin that had been around Jesus' head, isn't with the others. It's in a place by itself. Someone, having unwrapped the body (a

² Taken entirely from Tom Wright's *John for Everyone (Part 2)*, pp. 140-146.

complicated task in itself), has gone to the trouble of laying out the cloths to create an effect. It looks as though the body wasn't picked up and unwrapped, but had just disappeared, leaving the empty cloths, like a collapsed balloon with when the air has gone out of it....

Then comes the moment. The younger man, the beloved disciple, goes into the tomb after Peter. And the idea they had had to that point about what must have happened – someone taking the body away, but unwrapping it first – suddenly looks stupid and irrelevant. Something quite new surges up in the young disciple, a wild delight at God's creative power. He remembers the moment ever afterwards. A different sensation. A bit like falling in love; a bit like sunrise; a bit like the sound of rain at the end of a long drought.

A bit like faith. Oh, he'd had faith before. He had believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He had believed that God had sent him, that he was God's man for God's people in God's world. But this was different. 'He saw, *and believed.*' Believed that new creation had begun. Believed that the world had turned the corner, out of its long winter into spring at last. Believed that God had said 'Yes' to Jesus, to all that he had been and done. Believed that Jesus was alive again....

This is the moment of new creation...This is the first day of God's new week. The darkness is gone, and the sun is shining.”

Let's move now from Tom Wright's words back to the word of God from John 20, starting at verse 11. Imagine yourself in the story with Mary. John 20:11-18

John 20:11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They 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." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said 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.' " 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

The word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

I invite you back into meditation with Tom Wright's words:

“Stand with her (Mary) as she weeps. Think of someone you know, or have seen on television or in the newspapers, who has cried bitterly this last week. Bring them too, and stand there with Mary. Don't rush it. Tears have their own natural rhythm. Hold them – the people, the tears – in your mind as you stand outside the tomb. And then, when the moment is right, stoop down and look into the tomb itself. Be prepared for a surprise.

Where had the angels come from? They hadn't been there a few moments before, when Peter and John had been inside the tomb. Or maybe they had been. Maybe sometimes you can only see angels through tears. Whatever. When people are afraid, angels tend to tell them not to be. When people are in tears, angels ask why. Say it out loud. Whoever you've brought with you to stand here, listen to them say it too. They have taken away... my home, my husband, my children, my rights, my dignity, my hopes, my life. They have taken away my master. The world's grief, Israel's grief, concentrated in Mary's grief.

Now, as you stand with Mary and ponder her answer, and the answers the question would receive today from around the world, turn around and see the strange figure who's standing there. Who is he? What's he doing? Who do you think he is?

Mary's intuitive guess, that he must be the gardener, was wrong at one level and right, deeply right, at another. This is the new creation. Jesus is the beginning of it. Remember Pilate: 'Here's the man!' Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, and to fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests. As we stand there and listen, overhearing Mary's conversation, let the pain of the people you're with speak itself to Jesus, whether or not they know who he is.

Then listen for the name. It is a greeting, consolation, gentle rebuke ('Come on! Don't you know me?') and invitation, all rolled into one. Of course we know him. Of course we don't know him. He is the same. He is different. He is alive, with a new sort of life, the like of which we'd never seen before. Let Jesus call your own name, and the name of whoever you've brought with you, whoever needs his love and healing today. And then take it from there. Let the prayer flow on into whatever new conversation is appropriate.”

I want us to take a moment now in silence for that conversation with Jesus. Let's walk in the garden with him now and tarry there. After a short time I'll close our meditation with prayer.

Lord Jesus, thank you for meeting us in the garden this blessed Easter morning. Thank you for the joy we share as we tarry there with you. We praise you because you have risen as you said. We praise you because you have conquered the grave. We praise you because you are making all things new. All glory, laud, and honor to you, redeemer King! Amen.

And so on this Easter Sunday we celebrate the incredible goodness of God's salvation. From the extraordinary opening scenes in the Garden of Eden to the excruciating cries in the Garden of Gethsemane to the exuberant decree of the angels in the garden of the empty tomb, all of it working together to proclaim in rhythm God's great symphony of salvation.

Friends I hope that this morning after spending time in the garden with Jesus that we can say, along with Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the Lord!" I invite us to close by joining in an ancient rhythm the saints have used for ages to proclaim the good news. We'll say it three times.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.