

Today's text is the story of a woman who would not stop searching for Jesus until she found Him, which, strangely enough, is not a story John tells *instead* of telling the story of the resurrection, it is *how* John tells the story of the resurrection. John is instructing us that the *fact* of the resurrection, (and it is a fact) is a fact that contains a built-in imperative: the fact is this: Jesus died in your place and then defeated death. Since this is true, what should you do? Be like Mary, and look for Jesus until you find Him! And attached to this imperative is a great blessing: when you find Him, it will be far better than you ever could have imagine.

Mary Magdalene's heart had been completely captured by Jesus Christ, and in her love for Him, she set out to find Jesus' body and give Him the honor that He deserved. She had no idea how hard it would be to find Him, though, or how joyful she would be when she does at last meet Him. We see also the reward of such love, as Mary is the first person to see the Resurrected Christ, and becomes the first evangelist, spreading the good news that death had been defeated.

If you remember, Jesus had been placed in the tomb on Friday evening, but the coming of the Sabbath had meant that His followers weren't able to complete His anointing for burial. Mary Magdalene and several other women went early on Sunday morning to finish the task, and when they arrived, the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, and the body of Jesus was gone.

Now, after 2000 years of history, we know what an empty tomb means. We understand what is going on when we read that "the stone was rolled" away. We are conditioned to hear "empty tomb" and respond "He is risen!", but we should remember that it was not the sight of the stone or the empty tomb that brought comfort and joy to the disciples. In fact, it brought only confusion and more tears.

For Mary, an empty tomb meant simply "They have moved Him." Jesus wasn't risen, He was just gone. And so she runs back to find the disciples, and Peter and John come running, and John made it there first, and sure enough, the tomb was empty. There were grave clothes, but no occupant. Peter arrived a moment later, and went right on in to the tomb, and saw that the linen cloths were still there, which made no sense for a transfer. If they moved Jesus, why did they leave the shroud? He notices further that the face cloth had been folded up and placed to the side, which would certainly not have been done by a grave robber.

So then John came in, and he saw the emptiness of the tomb, and believed. He didn't believe in the resurrection, verse 9 tells us, he simply believed Mary's report that Jesus really was gone from the tomb. Consider that for a moment: how many times had Jesus explained to them what was going to happen? And look at verse 9: they didn't yet understand the Scripture, Psalm 16 – You will not let your Holy One see decay, or Isaiah 53 – when his soul makes an offering, His days will be prolonged. They didn't understand that this meant that Jesus not only *might* but *must* rise from the dead, in order to fulfill the Scriptures.

And then they went back to their homes. They weren't keeping vigil all together waiting for a glorious appearance. They did not know where Jesus was, and they just returned back to their homes. They confirmed Mary's report, and moved on. Jesus is gone.

But that wasn't good enough for Mary. Mary remained outside the tomb, weeping, just like the other Mary we saw in the preview event of Jesus' restoration of Lazarus. Matthew Henry comments on the irony here: we cry about the wrong things. What is meant to comfort us, the best possible news, the empty tomb, becomes for Mary the cause of mourning. She should be rejoicing, but she doesn't yet understand. Why? Because she hasn't yet found Jesus. **Finding an empty tomb means nothing. Finding Jesus means everything!**

But for Mary, the one she loved was dead. She had watched Him die horribly on a cross, and now she was denied the little measure of comfort that anointing the body would bring, because Jesus was gone. *Instead of returning home*, however, she **kept looking** for Jesus.

Think about that in terms of your own experience: are there times when Jesus seems far away from you, when He is hard to find? When you try to talk to Him in prayer, or read His Word, but nothing really happens? You feel nothing, nothing seems to change, and Jesus stays gone? The disciples and Mary give us two contrasting approaches for when that happens: Peter and John see that Jesus is gone, and so they stop looking. Mary sees that Jesus is gone, and *absolutely refuses to give up*. She will ask everyone she meets where He is, until she knows where He is. So which example do you tend to follow? Which example will you follow?

The disciples are not sinning. They didn't do anything wrong by going home, but they missed Jesus. Of course, He appeared to them later; they didn't lose Him forever – No faithful Christian can lose Jesus forever. But that day, in that moment, they missed Jesus.

The lesson for us is simple: Be like Mary! Don't stop looking for Jesus, just because He isn't in the first place you look! Many of us, when we are discouraged, sad, bitter, or depressed, we look for Jesus, but we only take a quick glance. We ring the doorbell, but only wait for a second. We call, but only let it ring once, and then give up, thinking that Jesus doesn't care because He doesn't answer instantly, and then we go off and justify our self-pity. "I looked for Jesus, but I couldn't find Him." When in reality, you barely started looking, and gave up. But Mary shows us a better way. Keep searching until you find Jesus! Ask other people where to find Him! When you need encouragement and life from Jesus, when you are weary in your faith, and tired in your walk with God, find Him in the mouths and hearts of others. You will think you are talking to the gardener, to a friend, to an elder, but when Jesus' words come out of their mouths, you will realize your mistake! But I'm getting ahead of myself! But whatever you do, don't stop looking for Jesus.

After the disciples left, Mary looks into the tomb again in desperation, and the strange thing is, the tomb is no longer empty. She sees two angels in white, sitting where Jesus had lain,

one at His head, one at His feet. And they ask her why she is weeping. From the other gospels we realize that there is actually still quite a crowd when the angels show up, with several other women and the guards that were placed to keep watch. The guards went into shock at the appearance of the angels, but the angels comfort the other women and inform them that Jesus is risen, just as He said, and that they should go and tell the others.

But John's singular focus is on Mary, and only in John's gospel do we read about Mary's encounter with Jesus. Apparently, while the angels were explaining things to the other women, Mary turned around and saw another man standing there, and doesn't realize that it is Jesus, and so she misses the angel telling the other women that Jesus is risen. This has seemed strange to many people, that Mary didn't recognize the one person she went to find, but it's much less strange when we remember *first*, that it was still dark, *second*, that the events of the day so far have been bewildering and upsetting, and *third*, that as far as Mary knows, Jesus is *dead*. You would think it was someone else, too! She mistakes him for the gardener, and asks him if he knows where the body is.

Jesus then answers Mary with one word, her name. "Mary". That's all He has to say, and her eyes are open, and she sees Jesus! She hasn't found his new tomb, she hasn't found his body, but Jesus Himself! And realize, beloved, that only someone who has been desperately looking for Jesus will fully appreciate finding Him. If Jesus is always just over your shoulder whenever you turn around, you will quickly take Him for granted, but if you seek Him, how sweet it is when you finally find Him! Mary would have been content just to find the body and anoint Him for burial, but her faithfulness and persistence is met with an encounter with the living Christ. Is searching for Jesus when everyone else around you has given up worth it? Ask Mary!

Mary responds, "Rabboni!" "Teacher!" And apparently throws herself at Jesus. She is so glad to have found Him, and overwhelmed to have found Him *alive*, beyond her wildest expectations. How often is that true? We seek for Jesus, and when we find Him, He is better than we ever could have hoped? His comfort is sweeter, His love is stronger, His Word more powerful, His pardon more freeing. She hoped to find Jesus' body, but she got so much more!

In fact, Jesus still has to redirect her away from His bodily presence. "Don't cling to me. This body that you see will soon be ascending. Don't become too attached to my physical presence, as wonderful as it is. The world is not ready for resurrection bodies just yet. Jesus is not shying away from physical touch. He is not overreacting to her invasion of His personal space. He is loving her by preparing her for the reality that soon, she will not have access to His body at all, which is what she thinks she has been seeking this whole time. But even more important that finding the body of Jesus is finding the person of Jesus, never to leave us or forsake us.

And here is the great reward of Mary's search: she, first among all the disciples, has seen the Resurrected Lord. She is given the opportunity to spread the Word, a more sure Word than the one the angels gave to the other women, because she has found Jesus. What other faith includes and even exalts women like our faith? Mary is the first evangelist, the first herald of the good news: "I have seen the Lord."

And this is the reward of all who seek Him – Jesus Christ will not hide himself from you. He is near to those who seek Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you. So where do we find Jesus? Don't look to the rolled-away stone, don't look to the empty tomb, don't even try to see Jesus. Don't look for Jesus in external experiences – let those experiences prompt you to seek further, until Jesus calls you by name. *Listen* to His Word, *listen* as He calls your name. The general, world-changing truth of resurrection must become an individual, personal recognition of the resurrected Jesus Christ as He calls you by name. Don't let anything keep you from seeking Jesus. Do not give up when He is difficult to find. Spend your life seeking Jesus in His Word so that when He speaks to you, you can recognize the voice of your Resurrected Lord.

Here is the message: Look for Jesus until you have found Him. When you find Him, it will be better than you can possibly imagine, because Christ is risen from the dead. Now, go and tell everyone.

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.