

"Believing Without Understanding"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

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. ²So 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." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. 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." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

Again and again, the gospels say that the disciples did not understand. Jesus would teach them something, and they would fail to grasp it. Jesus would tell them a parable, but it just confused them. Even now, after years of following Jesus — walking with him, worshiping with him, learning from him, eating with him, and even observing up close his final trial, suffering, and death — still they do not understand. Jesus had told them, numerous times, that the messiah must be condemned unjustly, suffer a death that he did not deserve, and then be raised from the dead. But even now, even in the dawn of Easter morning, they still don't know what is really going on.

One could say that this is just one of those unfortunate truths about the human condition. Even when it comes to the people we know best, we do not always understand why they do the things they do or say the things they say or choose the paths they choose. In his famous work, "A River Runs Through It," author Norman Maclean remembers a sermon he once heard preached by his father, the Reverend John Maclean. It was clear that the tragic death of Norman's younger brother Paul was on the pastor's mind. "Each one of us here today," said Reverend Maclean, will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is

those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them – we can love completely without complete understanding.¹

The disciples had walked with Jesus in much the same way. They should know him by the time Easter rolled around, but still he eluded them. The full truth, the full story, the full glory eluded them. They had loved him, as best they could, but they had loved without complete understanding.

But they understood one thing now. They understood that it was all over. Jesus was dead and buried. The centurion guards understood this when they stuck a sword in his side to check. They hadn't even bothered to break his legs on the cross as they would normally do to ensure that the crucified criminal was dead. They didn't think they needed to do that. The whole process had not taken as long as it normally would, but they saw enough to know that Jesus, the so-called "King of the Jews," was dead.

The disciples understood it, too. They knew that their journey with the Teacher was over. No more fishing for people. Time to go back to fishing for regular old fish. Time to unroll the nets, pull the boats off the beach, and return to the old lives that they once had known, lives fully subject to the powers of this world, lives eked out in difficulty, lives that ended in a death that was rarely noteworthy... and always final. The cause of Christ was dead. Their hope in Christ was dead. This much they understood.²

And then they saw the empty tomb... and everything they thought they understood was turned on its head. Mary Magdalene runs back to tell the group that somebody had taken Jesus' body from the tomb, that it was gone. One of the disciples, whose name we do not know, got there first. That unnamed disciple saw it all for himself -- the door rolled away, the burial clothes left behind, but no body to be found. "He saw and believed," the scripture says, but he did not understand. It looked like someone had taken the body, but he could not be sure. There were not enough clues. And yet, still, he believed. He believed completely even without complete understanding.

And that is where we find ourselves this morning, nearly 2,000 years later. The resurrection remains a mystery to us. A sacred mystery, but a mystery nonetheless. There is actually a book for sale on Amazon.com called "The Resurrection of Jesus Made Easy: An easy-to-understand pocket reference guide." It's a paperback. For \$28.32 it can be yours. Seems like a small price to pay for complete understanding of the most profound mystery in the universe. Still, I haven't bought it, and it's because I don't buy it. I don't buy the idea that the resurrection can be explained in a paperback. This kind of wisdom is so high we cannot attain it. This kind of mystery is so deep that we can't really explain it. Just as it did for the first disciples, the empty tomb calls us into the half-light of its chamber, bidding us to believe even without complete understanding.

The empty tomb calls us to this kind of belief in at least three ways. The first is that the empty tomb affirms that JESUS LIVES.³ Somehow, in a way that we do not fully understand, Jesus emerged from the deep, dark valley of Holy Week victorious over the powers of this world. The crucifixion of Jesus was not just an act of political power, or religious power, or military power, or economic power. It was all of them acting together. All of the cosmic powers that rule this world — all the powers that we as humans cannot escape — we aligned against Jesus... including perhaps the greatest of them all: death. The empty tomb marks the defeat of all of these powers by Christ acting through the power of the Holy Spirit. None of those powers, including the power of the grave, were strong enough to hold him. As the famous Presbyterian pastor Peter Marshall once said, the empty

¹ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*,

² Peter Marshall, quoted in Catherine Marshall, *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*, "The Grave in the Garden" (Grand Rapids: Revel, 1994) pp. 103-4.

³ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperOne, 1999), p. 129.

tomb proves that “Death is not a wall, but a door.”⁴ In the dawn of Easter, we proclaim our belief that Jesus lives, even though we do not completely understand how he pulled it off.

The second call to belief that issues from the empty tomb is that JESUS IS LORD.⁵ When Mary meets the risen Lord in the garden, she thinks he must be the gardener. In her grief, she does not understand what is going on, or even who is standing beside her. But when Jesus calls her by name, her eyes are opened. In that moment, she knows she is not just seeing a vision of a person she once knew. Instead she proclaims, “I have seen the Lord.” Because she had known him during his lifetime — because she had seen what he had done and heard what he had said and known how he lived — she is able to see the divine presence of Jesus. Since that time, Christians have struggled to understand how divinity and humanity can mutually co-exist in the person of Jesus. We still do not fully understand it, but as we stand before the empty tomb on this Easter morning we confidently proclaim our belief that Jesus is Lord.

Finally, the empty tomb confirms that our personal encounter with the Jesus who is alive, the Jesus who is Lord, is far from over. As Mary reaches out to embrace Jesus outside the tomb, he holds her back. “*Do not hold on to me,*” he says, “*because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*” That which will happen is not yet complete. The process of resurrection is still unfolding. In Christ, God is constantly MAKING ALL THINGS NEW.⁶ Like the potter’s hand on the clay, the hands of God remain on us, reshaping us and reforming the entire world, until that day when all of it conforms to God’s heavenly vision of peace and love. The newness of the world was opened to Mary Magdalene in that moment when the risen Lord called her by name.

There is still so much about these things that we do not understand. And that is OK. Wondering is OK. Questioning is OK. Doubting is OK. Not understanding is OK, because God is big enough, gracious enough and patient enough to handle it.

When he was a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point, Douglas MacArthur was working through his homework in his civil engineering class. The text for that evening was incredibly dense and complex. It discussed the relationship between time and space that Einstein would later formulate into his Theory of Relativity. Knowing that his professor, Gustave J. Fieberger, was fond of calling on students to recite, and knowing that he really didn’t get this stuff that he was reading, he went to one of his tried and true strategies. He basically committed the reading to memory. Sure enough, the next day, he was called on by the professor, he rattled off a pretty much verbatim recital of one section of the text. Colonel Fieberger looked at him for a moment and then asked, “Cadet, do you understand this theory?”

Without hesitation, MacArthur answered “No, sir, I do not.” The room was eerily silent. MacArthur braced for the professorial response. And then it came, slowly but deliberately. “Neither do I, Mr. MacArthur. Class dismissed.”⁷ MacArthur went on to graduate from West Point at the top of his class.

So, even if you came to worship this morning harboring many doubts, there is still something about the empty tomb that brought you here, and I think it is that still small voice inside you that wants to move beyond what we do not fully understand to something deeper, something that we know to be true... that there is something stronger than death... that the Lord who created the heavens and the earth is present with us in ways that we can touch, see, and feel... and that this God

⁴ Peter Marshall, quoted in Catherine Marshall, *The Best of Peter Marshall*, “The First Easter” (Carmel: Guideposts, 1983) p. 333.

⁵ Borg and Wright, p. 136.

⁶ Revelation 21:5.

⁷ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/u/understanding.htm>

is still busy caring for us, helping us, shaping us, and making everything new. We may not understand it, but in the early morning light of Easter, before the door to an empty tomb, the risen Christ is calling to you by name in the hope that you, too, will believe, even without complete understanding. **Amen.**