

Imagine what it must have been like for Mary Magdalene and the disciples. We've heard the story. We know all about Easter. The Resurrection doesn't surprise us. "The tomb was empty? Well, duh. It's Easter!"

But we've got 20/20 hindsight. Mary and the disciples didn't. To them, Easter was a surprise.

Imagine for a moment that you were driving out to a cemetery to visit the grave of a friend or a loved one. You drive through the gates. You start making turns along the various roads in the cemetery to get to the grave. But as you draw nearer, you begin to have the sense that something is wrong. As you get closer, you see that there is a pile of dirt right next to your friend's grave. You stop your car and get out. You start walking toward the grave. You can see by now that the pile of dirt was definitely removed from your friend's grave. You can see the hole in the ground. As you approach, you look down into the grave with dread. At the bottom of the hole, your friend's casket is open. But there's no body in it. All that's in the casket are the clothes your friend was buried in.

Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but my first assumption would not be, "My friend has been resurrected. Glory to God, it's a miracle!"

Instead, I'd probably be dialing 911. I'd be getting ready to file a police report about grave robbery. Or I might be driving over to the cemetery office, getting ready to chew somebody out. "What did you do with my friend's body? Why did you dig it up? And why in blue blazes would you strip their clothes off their body at the graveside and throw them back into the casket? Who would do such a twisted thing?"

The last thing I'd ever be thinking is, "Alleluia, my friend is risen indeed."

For Mary and the disciples, their initial reactions must have been similar. The Gospel According to St. John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb very early on Sunday morning, just before sunrise.

Mary has gone to the tomb to deal with death face to face. She knew Jesus' death was real. It was as real as the iron of the nails. It was as real as the wood of the cross. It was as real as the stone of the tomb. She had seen him bleed. She had seen him die. She had seen him buried.

But things at the tomb are not what she expects them to be. When she gets to the tomb, she finds that the large stone covering the entrance door has been rolled out of the way. In the predawn twilight, that's a pretty scary thing. The tomb would appear to be a frightening, yawning, dark mouth of death and decay. In the darkness, she stays back, too afraid to look into the tomb.

She assumes the worse: grave robbers. Yes, they would have been rather unlucky grave robbers. Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb, but Jesus wasn't rich. He was buried without a penny to his name. His few possessions had been gambled away at the foot of the cross. He died naked and destitute. Grave robbers would have found nothing to rob.

Or, maybe it was Jesus' enemies. Maybe it was the Romans, or the priests who came to take his body and do something nasty to it. Either option was unpleasant.

Then Mary thinks, 'Maybe his disciples know something.' So she runs as fast as she can to get them. There's a real sense of panic and urgency here. She finds Peter and John and says, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." And they all go running back to the tomb. In fact, Peter and John get into a footrace. They just have to find out what's going on.

John gets there first, but hesitates at the door. Peter is impetuous as always. He goes right into the tomb. John then follows him in.

In the tomb, all they find is the linens that once wrapped Jesus' body. This makes zero sense. If someone had taken the body, they wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of trying to unwrap the body from the very long shroud that surrounded it. They would have just grabbed the body and split. But if it wasn't grave robbers, what was it? Where was Jesus' body?

When Peter sees the grave linens, he's confused. But when John sees the same linens, our Gospel says that something clicks for him. This is not the work of grave robbers. This is something far greater. This is something far more wonderful. Our Gospel says, John believes.

But then John makes the same mistake that we often make. He keeps his insights to himself. He is the first to believe the Good News of the Resurrection, but he doesn't share it with Mary or Peter.

Instead, John and Peter go back home. John's mind is probably churning with wonderful possibilities. Good old Peter is probably just really bewildered. But they can't do anything more at the tomb, so they go home. And they leave Mary outside the tomb. All she can do is stand there and cry.

A little later, she sniffs back her tears and looks in the tomb herself. There are a couple of guys in there. We're told that they're angels, but apparently, Mary is so distraught that she doesn't recognize them as such. They ask her why she's upset. She's still stuck in the grave robber scenario. She says, "They've taken my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him."

Just then, Jesus appears to her. She's so upset that she doesn't recognize him. She thinks he's the gardener. But she's really incoherent. She's so upset that she's not thinking straight. She addresses him as, "Sir," which is not a title you'd use for a lowly gardener. But then she's rather insulting, "Sir, if you have taken his body; Sir, if you're a grave robber, would you please tell me where the body is?" Then she says something almost comical. "Tell me, and I'll carry his body away." Mary, who probably wasn't an inch over 5 feet tall is getting ready to start hauling bodies around the cemetery.

And then, she does a shocking thing. She turns away from Jesus. She turns her back on her resurrected Lord. She is so distraught by Jesus' death and the disappearance of his body, that she is unable to see him standing behind her. She is so caught up in sorrow and grief and

death, that she doesn't turn and embrace the joy and the light and the life that's standing right there in front of her.

So Jesus takes matters into his own hands. Probably with the most wonderful smile of love on his face, Jesus says one word: "Miriam." In English, "Mary." The Good Shepherd calls one of his sheep by name, and she responds.

In a flash, in an instant, it all clicks together for Mary. She can't comprehend how it's happened, but she knows that it is her friend and teacher and Lord who is standing there. She turns and says one word: "Rabbouni," in English, "Teacher." But Rabbouni means more than just teacher. Rabbouni means 'my great teacher.' In a wonderful moment, all the swirling pieces of the jigsaw puzzle come snapping together into a coherent picture. Her teacher is there. He is alive.

Jesus then sends Mary back to the disciples. She tells them, "I have seen the Lord."

Mary came to the tomb sad, and then she became confused and saddened further. But then, in an encounter with the risen Christ, she becomes an apostle. The word apostle means "one sent forth with a message." Mary Magdalene is often called the apostle to the Apostles, and it's a good title for her. For she is sent with a life changing message to take to the disciples. She is sent with the Easter proclamation, Jesus is risen.

The Easter proclamation is startling. Why are you looking for a corpse? What are you doing looking in a cemetery? That's the wrong place. Jesus Christ is alive, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

Like the disciples, we can respond to the Resurrection in different ways.

Like Peter, some of you might be tempted to say, "It's all too confusing, it's all too much to deal with. I just can't make sense of it." Like Peter, you might just be tempted to turn your back on the empty tomb, to go home, to not deal with the life changing ramifications of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and alive today.

Or like John, some of you might be tempted to keep things to yourself. You might be tempted to say, "Yes, I believe." You embrace the Good News, but you forget to share it with those around you, both those near and dear to you, and those you meet in your daily lives.

Or like Mary, some of you may be so overcome by the sorrows and pains and hardships of this world, that you completely miss out on the presence of the Risen Christ standing beside you. Your focus may be so diverted by the concerns of the world, that you miss the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God right under your nose.

For all of us, there is good news to be grasped, good news to be celebrated, and good news to be shared.

Jesus is alive.

Death is defeated.  
Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

And Jesus is present with us. He is present in his word. He is present whenever two or three gather in his name. He is present when we break the bread and share the cup.

Celebrate. Rejoice. Be glad.

Christ is risen.  
He is risen indeed.