

Easter 2009 John 20: 1-18

The Case of the Empty Tomb

I enjoy a good mystery. I guess that's why I love to watch CSI on TV, especially the original series. It is amazing to me what can be deduced from the physical evidence collected at a crime scene and from the corpse that is being autopsied. Without a body, however, the process of gathering evidence is greatly hindered.

What we read in today's gospel of John would be an interesting CSI case.

ACT I - When she arrives, Mary sees that the stone is rolled away from the entrance of the tomb but she doesn't compromise the crime scene by going inside. Instead she hurries to tell Peter and the other disciple, identified, as the one Jesus loved, that the body is gone. They have taken it away and she doesn't know where. Mystery writers love this kind of scene. Imagine opening a grave to find out that there is no body or the wrong body. In Jesus' tomb, there was no body. Was this the work of grave robbers? When the word did get out about this, it was said that the disciples probably did it in order to fake the resurrection predicted by Jesus, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days." He was talking about the temple of his body.

We don't if Mary thought this was robbery or not, only that she was frantic to find Jesus' body. This is understandable. We can identify with the importance of knowing where a loved one is laid to rest. We sense it when we hear of how the remains of some of the victims of the terrorist attack on 9/11 were never found. We sense it when we hear of soldiers who are MIA, missing in action. Families who are unable to lay their loved ones to rest suffer profoundly. This is what Mary was experiencing at the tomb. She knew Jesus was dead. With her own eyes she had seen him die on the cross and she had seen him buried but now she was frantic to know where his body was. How profound a sorrow is this.

ACT II - She returned with Peter and the other disciple and they saw the evidence of the linen strips used to wrap Jesus' body and the cloth that would have covered his head neatly folded a short distance from the linen strips. I can picture the CSI team taking a picture and bagging them for further analysis back at the lab. Peter leaves the tomb without drawing any recorded conclusions, but the other disciple, who we think is John the writer of this gospel, sees and believes. But we are left feeling not exactly sure what it is he believes. Remember the time of death was at 3PM on Friday

afternoon. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the third day. “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.”

When the disciples leave, having compromised the crime scene by entering it, Mary stays at the tomb, **Act III** of the CSI episode. She has still not entered the tomb but now as she weeps, she bends over to look inside and she “saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.” Before she even has a chance to ask who they are and where they’ve come from, they ask her why she is crying and she tells them, “They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.” You would expect her to be surprised to see these men sitting in the tomb but she seems not to be startled. Instead her behavior is totally focused on finding Jesus’ body. That’s all she cares about.

Next she sees someone she assumes to be the gardener. Thinking he might know something, she asks him where they have taken the body. Truly she came to the tomb expecting to find a corpse, but when this man gently says her name, “Mary,” she immediately recognizes his voice - more CSI evidence - voice recognition.

She calls out to him, "Teacher." And although it doesn't say it, she likely ran to him to embrace him. Jesus instructs her not to hold on to him because he has not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " The resurrection of Jesus and his ascension are seen here as one single movement.

He tells her this so that Mary will understand that he is not a resuscitated corpse like Lazarus was, whom Jesus raised from the dead to take his place again among his loved ones on earth. No, Jesus wants Mary to understand that he has entered into a new relationship with her and his disciples and by extension with us. He is the Risen Lord, no longer destined to walk the earth in human form but to reign on high, to prepare a place for us and to send us the Holy Spirit to prepare us for ministry and mission.

There are no witnesses to this scene between Mary, the angels and the gardener, now recognized as Jesus. Mary simply goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

In forensic terms, the mystery of the empty tomb would be placed in the cold case files, remaining unsolved for lack of evidence and because the missing body was never found. But in terms of faith that day, Mary became the first person to begin spreading the gospel. “I have seen the Lord.” And this is what we celebrate in our worship today – that He is alive and that we serve a risen savior.

As we take a last look back on this scene of the empty tomb, we can see how Jesus drew Mary out of her frantic search for him to discover who he was by the sound of his voice calling her name. Jesus let her emotions play out and he transformed her from a frantic seeker into a joyous believer.

It is the same with us, you know. Jesus uses the situations of our everyday lives and he draws us to discover that he is alive and there and with us all the time. It is up to us to seek him as Mary did. It is for us to focus on discovering Jesus at work in our lives. He knows us each by name and calls us too. Remember what he said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” and John tells us that Jesus “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4**When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

We can recognize his voice in the voices of those who reach out to us in need of help and compassion – our families, our neighbors far and near, even our enemies. We can tell them, not by words but by our behavior towards them, “I have seen the Lord.” This is what Jesus has empowered us to do as Christians. We can do great things in Christ, because he is Lord, and the victory over sin and death is his. But remember to listen for him in the here and now of every day. I guarantee that you will hear him call your name and you will know by faith, as we all do, that he is alive.