

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
April 8, 2012

The First Easter Morning

Read John 20:1-10, 19-20

Key verse: “Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (John 20:8).

“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” (v. 1). Saturday was the Sabbath, so the first day of the week would have been Sunday. The other gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene was not alone, but several women went to the tomb together that morning. “Women—last at the cross, and earliest at the grave,” noted E.S. Barrett.

The fact that Mary and the women were the first to go to the empty tomb is significant for a couple of reasons. One reason is that it reinforces the fact that, in his life, ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus elevated the place of women. A second reason is that it offers evidence for the trustworthiness of the resurrection accounts:

Bible scholar N.T. Wright comments: “The point has been repeated over and over in scholarship, but its full impact has not always been felt: women were simply not acceptable as legal witnesses. We may regret it, but this is how the Jewish world (and most others) worked....Critics of Christianity could seize on the story of the women in order to scoff at the whole tale; were the legend-writers really so ignorant of the likely reaction? If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding, reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact the first on the scene, or that the early church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both. Would the other [gospel writers] have been so slavishly foolish as to copy the story unless they were convinced that, despite being an apologetic liability, it was historically trustworthy?” (from Wright’s book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*)

“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’” (v. 2). John, the author of the fourth Gospel, refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He does this not to say that Jesus loved him the most, but as a way of writing his gospel with both humility (by not using his own name repeatedly) and objectivity.

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Mary Magdalene, in bringing the news to Peter and John, suspects that someone has stolen the body of Jesus. She seems not to suspect, at this point, that Christ has risen from the dead.

“Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first” (vv. 3-4). Commentators have suggested an explanation regarding the race between Peter and John might be: (1) Since John was at the cross, he very likely helped carry Jesus’ body to its burial place. Knowing the location of the tomb better than Peter might explain why John reached the tomb first. (2) The Biblical evidence suggests that John was younger than Peter. Perhaps, some suggest, John’s youth was the reason he “won the race.” Whatever the explanation, such detail adds to the authenticity of John’s resurrection account.

“He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (vv. 5-8).

Like Mary Magdalene, Peter and John approach the tomb with no expectation of a risen Christ. Verse 9 makes that clear: “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” What they see in the empty tomb causes them to believe. The linen cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus’ body have been left as if Jesus has passed through them without disturbing them. The cloth that had covered Jesus’ head is also left basically undisturbed. John realizes that a grave robber could not have left the grave clothes in this condition.

Only after seeing the empty tomb with the stone rolled away and seeing the undisturbed grave clothes, do John and Peter begin to remember what Jesus had said, that he would die and then rise again! There at the empty tomb on Sunday morning, their grief and doubt begin to turn to belief and hope.

That journey to belief and hope continued that evening with one of many post-resurrection appearances of Jesus: *“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord” (vv. 19-20).*

And so it is today—belief in the risen Christ leads to joy and to rejoicing! May it be so for you this Easter of 2012.

The British Methodist pastor and writer, W.E. Sangster, began to notice something wrong with his throat and leg. Doctors diagnosed an incurable disease that eventually caused his muscles to waste away, his voice to fail, and his throat to become unable to swallow. Easter morning arrived, just a few weeks before Sangster’s death. Still able to

hold a pen and to write shakily, he composed a letter to his daughter. In it, he said: “It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout ‘He is risen!’ But it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout.”

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