

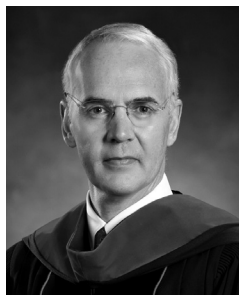
First and foremost

Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



HOLY WEEK SERVICES:
Maundy Thursday Communion, 7:00pm
Easter Sunday: 8:00, 9:30, 11:00am
10:45am (*Ignite* Modern Worship)
More details at FirstPresEaster.com



“Mary.”

John 20:1-16

If you received an email from a New-York-based law firm informing you that a distant relative had left you several million dollars

in their will, how would you react? I suspect you would initially respond with a measure of skepticism. But if a letter arrived in the mail the next day from the same law firm informing you of the details, you might begin to think it was worth looking into.

She came running to Simon Peter... (John 20:2)

In John’s Gospel (John 20:1-8), Easter Sunday morning begins in a strange and unusual manner for Mary Magdalene. As John records what took place, he does so in such a compelling manner that you begin to think this is worth looking into.

When Mary arrives at the tomb where Jesus had been buried, she is astonished at what she sees. The stone at the entrance of the tomb has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty. Surprised and incredulous, Mary runs to tell Peter, and Peter and John immediately rush to the tomb.

John arrives first, looks inside the tomb, and sees strips of cloth lying in the tomb. Moments later Peter arrives, enters the tomb, and notices the linen cloths as well as the burial cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head.

John is careful and detailed as he records what takes place next, intentionally seeking to communicate to his readers the enormity of the situation. Recounting Peter’s entry into the tomb and looking around, John does not use the normal Greek word for “see,” but rather uses an alternative word from which we get the English word “theorize.” Peter is, therefore, slowly looking around, trying to make sense of what he has encountered, clearly searching for an explanation. Despite the incredulous nature of the evidence before him, Peter is attempting to get his mind around what has actually taken place.

I imagine Peter asking himself, “How can this be? Why would someone remove some of the grave clothes from Jesus? Since the cloth was covered in valuable spices designed to keep the body from smelling, why would someone remove it? Surely the person who removed the body would want the body to smell as pleasant as possible for as long as possible. Grave robbers would not have done that. *What is going on?*” Peter gazes intently, looking for an explanation, logically and rationally asking what is happening.

Across the world this week, millions of people will celebrate the wonder and joy of the Resurrection. Others will consider Easter as little more than a metaphor or parable, designed to comfort those for whom wishful thinking is reassuring.

There are folks who will dismiss Easter as being “true for you but not for me,” a matter of interpretation, not unlike a group of blind men encountering an elephant for the first time. The first handles the trunk and describes the elephant as a long and flexible creature. Another touches the leg, and says, “No, no, no. An elephant is short and stiff, not long and flexible.” The third feels the side and says, “You are both wrong; an elephant is huge and flat.”

This illustration initially comes across as both prevalent and plausible. It teaches that we are all partly right and partly wrong. It also suggests that no one can see the whole truth or understand it, implying that we should see religion in a similar manner. This illustration is a helpful argument to explain differing points of view. Yet when we consider the details, we notice that the person describing the scene of the three blind men is claiming that the observer alone can see what is actually happening; everyone else is wrong.

On Easter Sunday morning Peter and John were confronted with the evidence before them, not others’ perception of what took place. They personally encountered an empty tomb and empty grave clothes.

He saw and believed... (John 20:8)

John reports, “Finally the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went inside.

He saw and believed.” For John, the point of belief came when he encountered the empty tomb. Mary, on the other hand, was so distraught, bewildered, utterly confused, and emotionally drained that she struggled to comprehend the enormity of what had taken place.

Mary had come from a background of demonic possession, a vortex of self-loathing, suspicion, anger, and hatred. Having been exposed to the love and grace of God in Christ, a supernatural peace had transformed her; she experienced a deep and abiding peace for the first time in her adult life. Yet now all this. How could this be? How could God allow such a thing? Did He not care? How could He allow someone to take the body of Jesus? Jesus, of all people. Mary had so many questions; no wonder she wept, heartbroken.

Then things begin to change (John 20:11-16). Someone is standing close to Mary; she assumes he is the gardener. He asks, “Why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away and I don’t know where they have put him,” Mary responds. When Mary is asked a second time, “Why are you crying?” Jesus reveals Himself to her by calling her name. A single word is used. “Mary.” He uses her name the way her parents would have when she was a wee girl—intimate and private and full of transforming love. *“Mary.”*

Mary, like generations still unborn, discovers that it is in the quiet crucible of her personal sufferings that her noblest dreams and fervent prayers are born. God’s greatest gifts are given in compensation for what you as His child have been through. Jesus meets Mary at the point of her greatest need with the overwhelming truth of His love displayed in the Resurrection.

Resist the urge this Easter to mock God with metaphor, or replace the supernatural with parable. Seek to encounter the risen Christ in the Gospel narrative and grasp the enormity of what we mean when we say, “He is risen, He is risen indeed.” Surely this is worth looking into.