

“What if He has risen?” John 20:1-18

“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 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.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They 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.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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.”” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” -- and that he had said these things to her.”

Jesus Christ has risen! He has risen, indeed!

This is how countless multitudes of God’s saints today greet one another all around the world, and have been doing it for almost two thousand years. But how often are those words only, where we don’t really grasp their meaning and impact?

But now think about this – what does it mean if Jesus, indeed, has risen from the dead? For one, it means that the Eternal Word, through whom everything was created and in whom everything still holds together, indeed, became flesh and dwelt among us. That the Eternal and Almighty became one of us.

It also means that everything that Jesus said is true, everything that He foretold is true. It means that we can fully and completely trust the Scripture as the Word of God in everything it reveals to us. That we can with confidence use the Bible as our “infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life”. Yes, we can!

It also means that God Himself in Jesus Christ has done everything that needed to be done so that all the obstacles that separated us from Him are removed. "It is finished!" Our sins, all of them are forgiven. You are forgiven. It is done!

Our rebellion against God, our betrayal and failures are forgotten. Our guilt is taken away, our shame is covered. You are made very good in the eyes of your Father in heaven. And you have received new hearts that long to be with your Creator and Redeemer.

It also means that sin and death have no power over us. Sure, we will die in this old and sinful flesh, and for good, but death will not have the final word. As Jesus was raised in the power of the Holy Spirit so will be you, to dwell together with Him in the New Heavens and New Earth and to see Him as He is.

Meanwhile, all the God's chosen and beloved people, one by one are called by the Gospel and united with Jesus in His family, the Church, where the Holy Spirit embraces us in more intimate ways than we can comprehend.

It is true that the resurrection stands at the very heart of our Christian faith. The resurrection of Jesus is the very foundation on which our new life in Christ is built. If there is no resurrection of the dead, if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, the whole Christian enterprise is strange, to say the least, and we are wasting our time.

Everything in our faith system hinges on the resurrection of Jesus. And it may seem really puzzling. Why to have such a strange and unbelievable foundation? For who, being in a sound mind, can believe such a strange thing? Resurrection from the dead?! Even Christians can sometimes wonder... It is unbelievable, nevertheless, it is true.

And this is what our today's reading from John assures us. You may have heard people saying that "yes, perhaps those pre-scientific people back then could believe stories like this, but not us, for we are so enlightened...".

Nothing can be further from truth as we will see reflecting on what John has written. Already the Old Testament prophets had foretold about the mystery that the Triune God was to perform. Of course, most of the time their message wasn't easy to understand.

But then, Jesus Himself was foretelling what was going to happen in Jerusalem. He was explaining it to His closest disciples and He was speaking about it also when His adversaries heard it. He was open about how His journey to Jerusalem was to end. But it seems that no one was able to understand what He was saying.

But, as we know, everything in that last week of Jesus' life happened exactly as He had foretold it. He was betrayed. He was captured. He was accused. He had to suffer from the hands of Jewish leaders and ... He was killed.

Now, what happened on the morning of the third day after Jesus' crucifixion? What were those "naïve people" doing? Waiting for Jesus' resurrection? Not at all. This is how John has recorded the events of that day.

In his account he honestly reveals how difficult it was even to those closest to Jesus' to believe in His resurrection. Unless they were absolutely convinced, beyond any doubts by... yes, by the risen Jesus Himself!

Early in the morning Mary comes to the tomb of Jesus and finds that the stone that closed the tomb had been taken away and the tomb was empty. What did she do? She began to praise God: "Jesus has risen, alleluia!" Not at all!

She is in despair, confused, she runs to Peter and John and tells them... the Good News? No! She tells them the bad news that **"they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."** They...

What about Peter and John? Being men of faith, they calmly respond: “Probably Jesus has risen from the dead, remember He kept telling us that this is what would happen.” Not at all! They are as shocked as Mary was. They run to the tomb, and find everything just as Mary had told them.

The stone lays on the ground. The tomb is empty. And what they see inside the tomb is more than mysterious. They see the linen cloth where Jesus’ body was wrapped on Friday evening laying exactly where His dead body was put.

The linen still lies there. It wasn’t unwrapped. It wasn’t torn off Jesus’ body. It still lays there. But the body itself has disappeared. Moreover, the face cloth which had been on Jesus’ head now lays not with the linen cloths, but carefully folded up in a place by itself.

Wouldn’t that be a good moment to say: “Remember, Jesus said that He will rise on the third day, see! He has risen, indeed! Let’s rejoice!” But no, puzzled and confused Peter and John return back home.

As John himself remembers and records it: **“For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise from the dead.”** Meanwhile Mary has reached the tomb once again. Peter and John are already gone.

She is so overwhelmed by grief that she can’t properly understand what is happening around her. She sees two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” We don’t know how they asked it. But perhaps they were surprised. Why are you weeping, don’t you see what has happened? Jesus has risen! But Mary can’t even think that way. How could a sensible human being believe that the reason, why the body that was laid there dead and has now gone missing, is because Jesus has risen from the dead?

Mary repeats the explanation that makes sense to her. **“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”** Then something happened that made her turn around. Maybe the angels stood up and bowed before Jesus.

Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing but she still doesn’t not know that it is Jesus. Jesus says to her, **“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”** Supposing Him to be the gardener, Mary says to Jesus, **“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”**

And then finally – the moment of truth. Then Jesus said to her, “Mary.” The resurrected Jesus calls Mary by name. Perhaps you may know the feeling or at least can imagine it. You are among strangers, at least that is what you think is happening, and suddenly someone calls you by name. Jesus knows you by name!

He knows each one of us by name and He calls us by name. And when He calls us, His sheep recognize His voice. Mary did. What a surprise! Avalanche of emotions. Everything is turned upside down in the blink of an eye! Jesus IS alive! What a joy!

Seconds ago, she was devastated thinking that her beloved Master and Teacher was dead and even His body had disappeared. He is not dead! His body was not stolen or moved to some unknown location. He IS alive! **“Rabboni! Teacher!”**

Overflowing with joy Mary throws herself at Jesus' feet, grabs Him, He is back, her Jesus is back, she is not letting Him go. "Mary, Mary, stop it! It's okay. I am still here. I am not leaving yet. Now, get up and go and tell this to my brothers."

Mary gets up and goes to the apostles, probably looking back 100 times, filled with indescribable joy and relief and tells them everything and they... do not believe her! That much about how believable the fact of Jesus' resurrection seemed to them.

This is why Jesus kept appearing to them after His resurrection again and again, when they were alone and when they were together. He appeared to Peter and to the twelve, then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom were still alive [when Paul wrote about it], though some had fallen asleep, then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, last of all Jesus appeared also to Paul. (1Co 15:4-8)

As John wrote his testimony in one of his letters – they heard Jesus, they saw Him with their own eyes, they looked upon Him in awe, they touched Him with their hands, they ate and drank with the resurrected Jesus, and not only once.

All of this so that they could believe beyond any doubts that it is true. That Jesus has risen, in His new, glorious resurrected body and that all the blessings that His resurrection would bring us – they are ours. They are, indeed, yours.

Concluding let's hear once more the words that Jesus sent Mary to deliver to His disciples, and then they were sent to deliver this message to all nations, and we also have received these words of Jesus.

"Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."" Go and tell my brothers... and we could add, and my sisters. This is how Jesus speaks about us.

This is who we are to Him. This is your new identity. You are not only brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, but you are also brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. That's why He tells us: **"I am ascending to my Father"**, for God the Father is Jesus' true father and Jesus is His true Son. But then Jesus adds, **"and to your Father"**.

When we are united with Jesus by the same Spirit in our baptism, we are adopted in God's family, and Jesus' Father becomes also your Father in heaven. Jesus continues: **"I am ascending to my God and to your God"**. Jesus not only brings us in this divine fellowship with His Father, but He also remains human being forever. His God is our God as we share the same human nature. Forever!

As we can see, the resurrection of Jesus is not just a mystery of the past. It is the greatest source of our joy and the unshakable foundation for our future. Because we will follow in Jesus' footsteps into the presence of God.

You know what? As the psalmist cheers you up: **"In His presence there will be fullness of joy; at His right hand there will be pleasures forevermore"**. (Psalm 16:11) This is why we shout aloud together with countless multitudes of God's saints:

"Christ has risen! He has risen, indeed!"

Amen.