



Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:1–18).

Have you noticed how much running there is in this story? I lose my breath just reading it! Everybody is running. Here’s the real shocker: they’re running in a graveyard. People run in a lot of places but not in a graveyard. In graveyards we walk softly; we

walk with reverence; no one runs there. What was it about that morning that sent these people running in the graveyard?

Like many of you, I run on the sidewalks in the mornings and evenings in my neighborhood. But it’s a different kind of running. I resemble Good Friday more than Easter Sunday. I see others, too. Our faces are etched with pain. We’re trying to keep our heart rate up and our waistline down, but there’s not much joy in it.

I see people running around town; overcommitted. People trying to get to work; trying to get their kids to school or soccer practice or youth group. I see people running through airports trying to get all the way from Gate 1 to Gate 59 in two seconds.

I see some who run in fear or in anger. People running away from something. A 16-year-old runs away from home. A 46-year-old runs a way from a marriage. Fear can make a runner out of you.

But I don’t see very many people who run out of sheer joy. I read a book a couple of years ago called *Born to Run*. It’s written by an ultra marathon runner who discovered a tribe of Indians deep in the Copper Canyons of Mexico. The Tarahumara Indians love to run. They run barefoot for 50 miles over rugged terrain in scorching heat. They run on the balls of their feet like children prancing over wet grass. They just run, not because they’re in a hurry, not because they’re overcommitted, not because they’re trying to lose weight. They run for the sheer joy of running.

That’s the spirit of the running in this story. The three main characters—John, Mary and Peter—are all running. In a way, they’re running towards faith in the risen Lord. But if you look carefully you’ll see each runs differently. In the same way, we who gather on this Easter morning come to faith in the risen Lord in different ways. I want you to see how the Bible respects our individual journey. My guess is you’ll find yourself somewhere in this story.

The Different “Shades” of Faith.

John—a simple faith

The first runner is John. John is called the disciple “Jesus loved.” Isn’t that a great nickname? What’s funny about it is that it’s a nickname John gave himself. It speaks of his own sense of closeness with Jesus.

But it wasn’t that way. John and his brother James were born into a successful fishing family. Jesus nicknamed them “Sons of

Thunder." Early on, they lived up to their reputation. One day, Jesus was looking for a place to stay. He sent messengers into a nearby village to see if someone there would put him up. But no one there wanted anything to do with Jesus. When John and James heard this they said to the Lord, "Master, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down from the sky to burn up the whole city?" Needless to say, that wasn't Jesus' style.

Yet, despite this, John was extremely close to Jesus. When Jesus had to choose just three men to go with him somewhere, John was always one of them. At the Last Supper, it was John who sat right next to Jesus. When Jesus hung on the cross John was the only Apostle there. It was to John that Jesus entrusted his own mother.

Here in the predawn dark we see John in a footrace with Peter. He's heard from Mary that someone has stolen the body of Jesus from the tomb. He and Peter take off like two men with wings. John outruns him and gets to the tomb first. But John was faster than Peter in other ways too. He was also faster to believe.

Did you hear the story? When John got to the tomb, he didn't walk inside at first. He just stooped and looked inside. He saw the linen wrappings lying there. It wasn't as if someone had unwrapped Jesus from the linen wrappings; it was as if he'd passed through them, after which they depressed down like an emptied cocoon. John had a minute to think about that before Peter arrived.

Finally Peter arrived, cut in front of John, and barged right into the tomb. Then John himself entered and in v. 8 he just says he *"saw and believed."* Isn't that great? John wrote that about himself. He saw and he believed. It was so simple for John. He was quick on his feet but he was quick to come to faith in a risen Lord as well. He didn't need a lot of proof. He didn't need to see Jesus pass through walls. He didn't need to hear his voice or touch his wounds. He hadn't even seen the risen Lord! But, he saw the empty tomb; he saw the grave clothes; that was enough for John.

There are some of you here this morning like John. You saw and you believed. It didn't take much. At that moment your life changed. For some of you that happened when you were a small child. You may even have a hard time remembering a time you didn't believe. Faith in a risen Lord came easy for you. It didn't take some enormous intellectual struggle to bring you to faith. You didn't have to hit "rock bottom" emotionally or morally to believe; it just seemed like the shoe of faith fit, and so you slipped it on.

I speak with people like you all the time. The challenge for you is to take it to the next level; to take the next step and turn that easy faith into hard discipleship. Discipleship means following

hard after Jesus. It means allowing your faith to change the way you live. Jesus requires more than an easy faith for his disciples. He requires we put that faith to work.

It's like coming to an old walking bridge. You look at it and size it up and say, "I believe this thing can hold me." But, your faith is only as good as your willingness to step on that bridge and walk across. John got on that bridge. This man, for whom faith came easy, lived the rest of his life telling people about Jesus. As an old man, he suffered for his faith, being exiled on the island of Patmos. His faith was simple, but it wasn't shallow. Maybe like John you need to take the next step and follow hard after Jesus, turning easy faith turn into a risky, costly faith.

Mary—a grieving faith

But not everyone comes to faith that way. There are others in this story. Look at Mary. She's called "Magdalan" because she's from the Galilean town of the same name. Down through the years Mary's reputation has been stained by folklore. Some have said she was a reformed prostitute, but that's a myth. All the Bible tells us is she was one from whom Jesus had cast out demons. After that, Mary became a committed disciple of Jesus. She was one of the women who provided for Jesus out of her own funds. She was one of those devoted women with him at the cross.

And so, it's not surprising that we see her coming to the tomb early Sunday morning when it's still dark. She comes to anoint the dead body of Jesus with more spices and perfumes. It's an act of love. For Mary, hope had died and faith had died, but love had **not** died. This was a way for her to mourn the loss of her Master.

But when she gets there she's shocked to find the stone already rolled away and the tomb empty. Her grief wells up into anger and she **runs** full speed ahead back to town to tell the disciples someone has stolen the body! Peter and John take off and Mary walks back to the tomb and arrives there after they've left. She stoops and looks into the tomb and sees two angels, but through her tears she didn't recognize them as angels. They ask her why she's crying and she bursts out, *"They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him."*

Then she senses someone behind her and so she turns around and standing before her is the risen Lord. He asks, *"Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

Funny thing is, she didn't know it was Jesus. She thought he was the gardener! Then she says something without thinking, *"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you put him, and I will get him."* Imagine that. Mary, who'd been weeping for three days and had probably slept very little, offers to carry the full weight of a man wrapped in about 100 pounds of spices and

perfumes! This was an impossible task, but grieving people don't think straight. They just want to be with the one they love.

Then she heard him say, "**MARY!**"

As soon as he called her name, she knew. "**Rabboni!**" Jesus once said, "I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name and they follow." In that moment Mary came alive. Faith had died, hope had evaporated, but now it all gathered again around her risen Lord.

There are some of you here this morning like Mary. All this business about the joy of the risen Christ is hard for you because you're carrying around a load of grief or anger. Perhaps someone close to you has died or suffered a terrible tragedy and you can't understand why. Perhaps you've lost a job or the one you have is looking more and more like a dead end. Perhaps your marriage has died and all the counseling and all the seminars haven't really changed a thing. Perhaps a relationship has died; you hoped this would be the one but it all fell apart. Maybe it's your health. You thought if you just took good care of yourself you'd live to a ripe old age, but your doctor's not so sure. And because of your grief or your anger or your disappointment you can't see the Lord. Like Mary, he might be right there with you, but you can't see him because your grief and anger have buried you. How is it you'll come to faith? In the midst of your grief and anger, how will you see the Lord?

The answer is right here. Some of you have experienced it. First, he allows you to share with him your pain. He comes to you and asks, "Why are you crying?" Did you notice she's asked the same question twice? "Why are you crying?" He gives you the freedom to unload. As you share your pain with him he leads you to a place where in your heart you can hear him call your name. You're not even sure how it happens, but you come to that place where you believe he really is alive and his victory is your victory.

I've seen people like Mary come to faith. I've seen him call their name. He knows your name; he knows you. Like Mary, you can find faith and hope in the midst of grief and loss and anger. At the lowest point, you can hear him call your name.

Peter—a struggling faith

But John and Mary aren't the only ones who believe in this story. Peter came to faith too. Strangely enough, Peter is the last one coming to faith.

Peter was a man's man; a fisherman. Not the modern American kind of fisherman, lying down in a boat on a summer afternoon with his pole up in the air. He was a commercial fisherman. His face was weather beaten. His hands were calloused. His language was as dirty as the bottom of his boat.

But everything had changed for Peter, including his name. By birth he was Simon, but Jesus renamed him Peter, which in our language would be "Rocky." After meeting Jesus no one was as committed to Jesus as Peter was. He was zealous to the point of extremes. When Jesus said, "You will all deny me." Peter said, "Not me. I'm different."

But when Jesus died Peter's hopes and dreams died with him. First, John outruns him to the tomb. I wonder if that says something about Peter's reluctance? When he entered the tomb, he saw the very same thing John saw. He saw the linen wrappings up close. But, unlike John, Peter left that tomb unconvinced Jesus was alive. He headed back to his house as miserable as ever. Peter was the slowest of the three to believe.

Why? Perhaps it was because Peter was a realist. Peter was the kind of man who believed when you're dead, you're dead. He was the Yogi Berra of the disciples, "When it's over, it's over."

There are some people for whom faith in a risen Lord is a struggle. Are there any Peters here today? Are there any of you who find the shoes of Easter hard to put on? Is there anyone who finds John's faith too simple and Mary's faith too emotional? Oh, you try to believe. Maybe there was even a time when you did believe, and that haunts you, but it's hard to go back.

John Jeremiah Sullivan, an award-winning writer who has been compared to writers like Tom Wolfe and Flannery O'Connor, had what he considered an adolescent bout with faith. He's walked away from the church and a biblical faith, but he can't fully reject the person of Jesus. He writes: "At least once a year since college, I'll be getting to know someone, and it comes out we have in common a high school 'Jesus phase.' That always gives us an excellent laugh." Then he adds, "Except a phase is supposed to end—or at least give way to other phases—not simply expand into a long preoccupation... My problem isn't that I feel a sucker for having bought it all. It's that I love Jesus Christ... I can barely write that. He was the most beautiful dude... Why should He vex me? Why is His ghost not friendlier? Why can't I just be a good Enlightenment child and see in His life a sustaining example of what we can be as a species?" He says once you've known Jesus as God, it's hard to find comfort in him as just another man. And even after years of unbelief, he admits, "And one has doubts about one's doubts."

I think Peter had doubts, but I also think he had doubts about his doubts. Maybe you have doubts too. Maybe it's intellectual doubts. Or maybe your doubts are based not so much on Jesus but on the foolishness and hypocrisy of those who claim to know him. You have doubts, but maybe you have doubts about your doubts. Be honest with him about your doubts. As you seek for

truth, ask him to lead you to it. He'll give you what you need to believe. It will still be faith, but it will be a faith that makes sense.

Sometimes our doubts are more about ourselves. It was true for Peter. When the heat was on and his Lord was arrested, Peter denied Jesus three times. He cursed and wept bitterly over his failure. Even as Peter sprinted to the tomb he was overwhelmed with guilt, believing if Jesus ever did come back it wouldn't be for him.

Is there anyone here who feels like you're the last person he'd ever come back for? You're overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. You've heard the voice whispering in your ear, "You don't belong here. After all you've done, who are you kidding?"

Let me tell you something important. In the gospel of Mark, when this same story is told, the angel sends Mary back to the disciples and says, "***Go tell the disciples AND PETER to meet him in Galilee.***" Tell Peter, especially! Peter believed if anyone would be dropped off the invitation list it would be him. But instead he gets a special invitation. And when Jesus saw Peter he didn't lecture him; he gave him a job. He said, "***Peter, feed my lambs.***" He didn't just say, "I forgive you." He entrusted him with responsibility. That's the power of the resurrection! To take a failure and make him a leader!

That's also the power of the cross. Jesus died for our failures and our sins. He paid our debt and he offers us both forgiveness and a new life. Jesus died and rose again so that failure doesn't have to be the last word about us.

We can know Jesus is alive because he's still transforming lives. Where do you find yourself in this? Are you like John? Your faith comes fast and easy. Someone tells you Christ has risen and you

say, "Of course he's risen." But you need to take the next step, and the next step isn't so easy. You need to say, "Yes, Lord, I'll follow you. I'll put you first in everything."

Or are you like Mary, a bit slower perhaps? Someone says Christ is risen and you need to work through your feelings of grief and anger. He lets you do that, and he calls you by name.

Or are you the last one to come to faith? Someone says Christ is risen and you say, "Prove it! I haven't seen him." Or perhaps you say, "If he is risen, he would never come back for me." Yet Jesus came for you too. You too can come to say, "He is risen indeed!"

When you were a child, did you ever go on a walk with a group of friends and come to a stream? The water was just a little wider than you felt comfortable jumping across. You stood by the bank, wondering if you could make it. Then someone in your group did it. They ran and they jumped and they landed on the other side. And that encouraged you to go ahead and try for yourself.

In many ways, that's what we have in this Easter story. We have three people, three very different people—John and Mary and Peter—running and jumping each in their own way ahead of us. Each one made it to the other side. Each one encourages us wherever we are to run and jump as well.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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