

# Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word  
April 4, 2010

First Presbyterian Church  
Clarksburg, WV

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John 20:1-18

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. . .* (John 20:11 N.R.S.V.)

## Mary Lingered and Then. . .

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

The story is told of a man who was reading his Bible one night when he came upon this passage from 2 Peter 3:8, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

As the man mused on this he started praying. "Lord, if it is true then that a thousand years are to you as one day, then it must also be true that a million dollars would be like a penny to you."

And the Lord said, "Yes, that is true."

"Well, then," said the man, "I was wondering if you could do me a very small favor. Could you give me a penny?"

"Of course," said the Lord, "In a minute."

We live in a society of instant gratification. And we have been trained to want what we want, and to expect it right now. But faith is one of the things that just doesn't work that way.

In our passage from John, Mary goes and tells the disciples that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Peter and the beloved disciple, that would be John, run to the tomb. It is as if they are having a race to see who can get to Easter first. They get to the tomb, see that it is empty, and believe. We are not sure what it is they believe, but they believe. Then they leave.

Mary however lingers. She waits. In the midst of her grief and her loss, she lingers by the tomb. And because of that, she is the very first person to encounter the risen Christ. Jesus comes to her and speaks her name. At first she doesn't recognize who it is, maybe because of her tears, or maybe because she is just so sunk in her grief. But then he calls her name again, and with a shout of joy she recognizes him. It is Jesus!

She runs to him and Jesus warns her not to hold him. But to go and tell the disciples. Let me pause for a moment and focus in on that scene. The King James translation of the Bible has Jesus saying, "Do not touch me." To our modern ears that conveys a sense that Jesus is some kind of ghost. But

that was not true. Later he would appear to the other disciples and would invite Thomas to touch his hands and his wounded side.

The New Revised Standard Version translates Jesus' saying as , "Do not hold me." And the New Living Translation has, "Do not cling to me." So it isn't that Jesus doesn't want Mary to hug him, but that she is not to try to artificially prolong the moment. Jesus is on the move and she is not to keep him from what he needs to do. More than that, Jesus has things for Mary to do. Just as Jesus was sent from God, so he sends her. "Go and tell the disciples."

Mary lingers and so has her faith renewed. But then she is told to go and tell.

Again we might contrast that with the disciples Peter and John. They see the empty tomb and believe and leave. But they are not really changed. The next scene finds all of the disciples gathered together in a house. They are cowering behind locked doors. They don't believe that anything has really changed. But they do stay still long enough there, for Jesus to come to them. They encounter the risen Lord. He breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. And charges them also to go and tell.

Mary's story reminds us that faith often takes time. I read once about a pastor who asked his congregation what they wanted most for Christmas. And one woman immediately said, "I want to believe in the resurrection." That is a somewhat surprising thing for someone to say, but it points out the truth that we cannot make ourselves believe. Belief itself is a gift of God. What we can do is linger, stay awhile, wait for God.

Another woman reports that in her younger years she greeted the faith of the church with nothing but doubts, questions, and misgivings. Then in mid-life, she was given the faith that she did not have. She said that she had a vivid experience of the Risen Christ. She puts it like this. "It was like light came on in my life and things fell into place and I finally understood. I saw. I believed."

Her pastor asked her if she knew why she had been given the gift of faith at this particular time. And she said, "I have no idea why the light finally came on and things fell into place, right now at this specific time. I just know that I kept standing up every Sunday and saying the words of the Apostle's Creed, saying them over and over again, saying them from memory but not really in my heart. If you had stopped one Sunday and asked me, 'Do you really believe what you are saying about the resurrection, about the virgin birth and all the rest?' I don't know that I would have been able to have answered affirmatively. But one day, I did believe. And I am so very glad that I stood up, for all these hundreds of Sundays, and affirmed what I believed before I believed it." (*Pulpit Resource*, April, May, June 2010, pg. 11.)

That story warms my heart. This morning we have all said a number of times, "Christ is risen." I don't know if you say that with a strong faith this morning. If so, don't try to force it. For right now let it be enough that you are here. And you are!

Many times the scriptures speak of those who "wait for the Lord." Mary's story reminds us that if we will wait, if we will linger a little longer, God has great miracles in store for us.

A pastor reported the struggle in his church over the decision to open an interracial daycare center in the basement of his church. He lost some church members over that decision. Some people got mad and left. But most stayed.

One of those who stayed told the pastor about a conversation she had a few years later with a woman who had left. “She asked me how things were going at the church. I proudly told her that things were going great, that we had experienced more growth in membership last year than in any previous year of the decade. I explained to her how the daycare center had been the key to getting back in touch with our neighborhood. I told her that it was a miraculous thing to behold. And then, God forgive me, I said to her, ‘aren’t you sorry that you didn’t stay to see the miracle? When you left, you cheated yourself of experiencing one of the most miraculous works of God that I’ve ever seen.’” (Pulpit Resource, April, May, June, 2010, pp. 11-12)

Some people come to faith quickly, but others spend years wanting to believe, but not being able to. Mary’s story reminds us of the value of lingering, of waiting, of not impatiently jumping out of God’s hands. Sometimes it has to be enough just to stay, to keep on keeping on. Sometimes it has to be enough to know that Jesus desires our faith, and that if we stay, he will come to us, he will give us the faith we need.

Some of you are here this morning with a strong, energetic faith. And that is great. You are following Christ and you are an inspiration to us all. When people look at you, they say, that is what I want.

But some of you are here with doubts and questions, more a wanting faith than a having faith. To those in this second category, I would say, God is pleased that you are here, that you have stayed. You are here this morning. You have put yourself in a great place for Christ to come to you, to call you by name, to embrace you in love, and give you all the faith you need.

So stay awhile, linger before the mystery of the crucifixion of Jesus, as well as the empty tomb, and the resurrection of Jesus. Don’t be afraid to stay, even when sometimes it just feels like you are merely going through the motions. Stay, linger, wait for the Lord.

I say again, you have put yourself in a great place for Christ to come to you, to call you by name, to embrace you in love. Be assured that whether it takes just a moment or a long time, God will come to you. Your wait, like Mary’s, will be greatly rewarded. Amen.