

“EARLY RISERS”

John 20:1-18

April 5, 2026

Billy Crystal and Debra Winger starred in a 1995 romantic comedy called **Forget Paris**. Billy plays a man named **Mickey Gordon** who is a National Basketball Association referee. He receives news that his estranged father has passed away and there is no one else in the family to make the final arrangements. His father desires to be buried alongside his World War II Army platoon in France, of which he was the sole survivor. Mickey reluctantly handles the paperwork, selects the casket, sees it loaded on the plane and then boards it himself.

However, when Mickey arrives in Paris, he discovers the airline has misplaced the casket. The airline personnel are trying to find his father as he anxiously waits for hours in the airport. We watch Mickey become more and more agitated as time goes by until he finally explodes at the staff. **“You’ve lost my father!”**

We feel for Mickey. How well would we deal with the missing body of a loved one? Who among us wouldn’t be upset? If we jump back 2,000 years, we find Mary Magdalene and she is very upset. By the way, Magdalene is not her last name, but rather the town she came from.

The Bible tells us Mary got up Sunday morning while it was still dark which means between 3-6 AM. Most people do not get up at that time unless they have some place to be. Mary was a woman on a mission. The Sabbath was over and she goes to the tomb at first chance to mourn the passing of Jesus. It was commonly believed the Soul of a person hung

around the body for three days, and Mary wants to be in Christ's presence. However, her plans are interrupted when she sees the tomb has been opened and the body is missing. Mourning is replaced by shock, fear, and worry.

MORNING JOG

Not long ago I went to the wrong cemetery. It was a rather disorienting experience. I checked my phone to make sure I had the correct date and time which I did. But where was the funeral director, why wasn't the road plowed, where is the tent, the flowers, and for goodness sake the urn? Needless to say my anxiety level went up a few notches.

Fortunately, a few friends and family members also showed up at the wrong cemetery and informed me the correct place was further down the road. Being I had left extra time I arrived on the designated hour, and the service came off without a hitch, but still my adrenaline was pumping.

Imagine visiting your deceased relative only to find an empty niche, an open mausoleum, or a hole dug in the ground and the casket is missing. **How would you react?** It would shock us, anger us, upset us, and energize us. Empty graves motivate us to action. **Mary is pumped.** She goes on a **morning jog** to find Peter and John. She tells them, **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."** Interestingly, we are never told who the **"they"** are, perhaps grave robbers, vengeful Jews, etc. Anyway, the disciples in turn **race** to the tomb to investigate. Remember, adults in Palestine did not normally run,

especially over rocky ground, no tennis shoes, and their long robes would need pulled up.

THE CONFIRMATION

John was younger so he arrives first and waits for Peter to catch up. Both of them go into the open tomb and find the grave clothes as if the body had evaporated from them with the wrappings for Jesus's head rolled up. This is strange behavior for a robbery. Why take the body and leave the wrappings behind?

Then we read this odd phrase. **“Then the other disciple, who 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 returned to their homes.”**

Did they believe that Jesus rose from the dead at this point? I don't think so. What they believe is the body was missing. If they believed in a resurrection, wouldn't you think they would have told the other disciples, but instead they just went home. The purpose of these extra runners is to **confirm** what Mary has told them. They legitimize the story. There are now three witnesses to the empty tomb.

But here's the problem. An empty tomb does not lead to faith. There could be a number of reasons for a missing body. An empty tomb may interrupt our grieving process, but it does not make us believe in a resurrection. To arrive there we must return to the tomb which is where we find Mary. We don't know when she returned, but it sounds like after

Peter and John left. She certainly got her steps in for the day. Why did Mary go back again?

SHE WEPT

Scripture tells us, **“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.”** Body or no body, Mary’s heart was breaking and she wanted to be in the last place Jesus had rested. Isn’t that why we go to graveyards and lay wreaths or flowers? We want to spend time, to remember, to honor and even to talk with our departed loved ones. Mary is besides herself in grief and so distraught over the missing body that even when two angels appear in the tomb it doesn’t seem to phase her. She never asks them what are you doing in there? There is no evidence of shock or fear.

Instead, the angels speak to her and ask what must have seemed like the dumbest question in the world. **“Woman, why are you weeping?”** I mean if you go to a funeral and someone is crying do ask them why? **Of course not!** That’s rude, that’s insensitive, that’s a dumb question! Wouldn’t grief be the obvious answer? Angels, get a grip! Rather than be offended, Mary replies for a second time, **“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”**

CAUSE AND EFFECT

A man told his wife, “Well it has been confirmed that **Mosquito bites** can cause a concussion. Why just yesterday, one of them bit our neighbor in his head, but fortunately I was able to kill it with a shovel.”

From the time we are born we begin to learn the principle of cause and effect. Babies quickly learn that when they are hungry all they need

to do is cry and a nice couple will come to feed them. We learn if we hit our brother he is going to hit us back. We learn if you push the brake the car stops, put a pan over water and it will boil, and unless you freeze them, leftovers will eventually rot. This is the world of **Cause and Effect**.

Mary lived in a cause-and-effect world also. She is obsessed with where the body is. Notice she states this three times. Mary must recover the body. How she is going to move it on her own is a mystery. **Resurrection** is not a reality for her because in her cause-and-effect world dead bodies don't get up and move, heavy grave stones don't roll away and corpses don't unwrap themselves. Something caused these events to happen, and the only logical conclusion is somebody moved the body. So deep is Mary's pain and mindset that when Jesus appears she does not recognize him. Now this could be due to her blurry eyes, but I think she is so focused on empty tombs, missing bodies and death, she cannot see anything else.

Psychology would call this selective attention. It is that ability to focus on a thought or task while ignoring or blacking out the other stimuli around us, which is great if you want to complete a task. But it can work against us by blocking out information we need to pay attention to. In fact, one of the problems with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is it can lead to the development of an attentional bias, which causes a person to process emotionally negative information preferentially over emotionally positive information. And make no mistake Mary is in stress mode.

TURN AROUND

Notice what Jesus does next. **He said to her, “Mary.”** He calls her by name. And pay close attention. Scripture states, **“She turned and said to him Rabbouni or teacher.”** Mary turned away from the empty tomb, away from her grief, and away from her search for a dead body. Jesus interrupts not only Mary’s personal pain and obsession, he interrupts the ending of death itself, he interrupts the cause and effect living, and he opens us a brand-new reality that shifts everything we know.

Noted bible scholar **N.T. Wright**, wrote a book called, **“Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?”** In an interview with **Tish Harrison Warren**, he said, “I’m well aware that many people — including some in churches — have treated the Resurrection and Easter as a general way of talking about the rebirth of hope or a spiritual metaphor. Indeed, in the New Testament, the idea of resurrection is sometimes used metaphorically to talk about a new moral life, a life where everything is going to be different. But in the New Testament, that’s always rooted in the claim that when they’re talking about resurrection, they’re **talking about something that actually happened.**

In the first century, the word for **“resurrection,”** the Greek word ***anastasis***, was never about a vague sense of possibility or the rebirth of hope or anything like that. It was always about people who had been **bodily dead now discovered to be bodily alive.** I’ve shown in great detail in the book that all the early Christians for whom we have any evidence, right through until around 150 years after the time of Jesus, when they’re talking about resurrection, that’s what they’re talking about.

Then, as now, claiming that somebody was alive again — particularly somebody who made the sort of claims that Jesus made or were made about him — was **revolutionary**. It was dangerous talk. So if people don't like dangerous talk, then stay away from Easter is my advice.”

I don't have a problem with people having fun on Easter. It is a joyous time! It's nice to dress up, eat with family and friends, sing hymns, watch children hunt for easter eggs, who doesn't like candy and cute bunnies. The problem is it makes Easter too safe.

Mary's life was not changed because of an **egg hunt**. Her grief did not disappear because she was all cried out. She didn't stop staring at an empty tomb and seeking a body because of a talk with the gardener. In fact, there is a good possibility she never went back to the tomb again. Why would she?

Mary's life change because she heard her **name called**. She **saw** her teacher and friend. And Mary **touched** not a zombie, not a corpse, not an AI simulation, but the living person of Jesus Christ, which is why Jesus has to tell her let me go. Mary experienced resurrection and it changed her world to one of hope, joy, and life everlasting. This time she returns to the disciples with good news. **“I have seen the Lord!”**

Make no mistake, I think there is value to looking at a cross, visiting a grave or even staring inside an empty tomb. They remind us of our limitations and allow us to grieve, but they don't bring us to faith. Only resurrection can do that.

But there comes a moment when Jesus shows up. We will hear him call our name. Will we turn away from the world we think we know, and see the one who has overcome death? If so, by faith our eyes will be opened to a greater truth, to a hope that lives beyond the grave, and to strength and joy that overcomes the world. I warn you it is dangerous to take this resurrection road. It will turn your life around, it won't make you popular, and there will be those who scoff and think you foolish. Then again, they're the ones chasing after a bunny with an egg basket. The news of resurrection has come to us today and it leaves us with one question. Which way are we facing, toward the tomb or **the new horizon**? **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, April 5, 2026

Second Scripture Lesson

John 20:1-18

1 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.

2 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."

3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed,

9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb,

12 and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 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."

14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because 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.' "

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be To God.