

# **Year A**

## **John 20:1-18**

A good book may be read many times and bring delight to the reader on each occasion because there are new discoveries to be made. It's like your favourite walk which always inspires and delights because it's never the same twice. There are endless new possibilities to discover. John's Gospel is a very good read because it is so carefully written. There are many discoveries to be made as we read it together many times and this beautiful, startling passage in chapter

20 is no exception. For John, this is where his Gospel has been going. All that has preceded, points forward to the treasures within this text. There is so much for a preacher to take hold of here and to expound on and in the short time we have together I need to be very selective. I only want to take hold of one of the strands and to try and explain its significance to you.

The starting point is a puzzle as is often the case in John's Gospel and I must confess having read this passage for years I missed the very obvious issue until recently. The story is told breathlessly; maybe because

almost everyone is out of breath! Mary ran back to tell Simon Peter and the other unnamed disciple that Jesus' body had been removed from the tomb. In response, Simon Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb. The other disciple, traditionally believed to be John himself, outran Simon Peter and arrived first at the entrance of the tomb. We are told that he did not enter it but that he looked in and saw the linen burial wrappings lying there. That momentary gap, we don't know how long, between his arrival and Simon Peter catching up made all the

difference to him. It gave him a moment to process the scene and to think.

Test pilots have a litmus test for evaluating problems. When something goes wrong, they ask, "Is this thing still flying?" If the answer is yes, then there's no immediate danger, no need to overreact. When Apollo 12 took off, the spacecraft was hit by lightning. The entire console began to glow with orange and red trouble lights. There was a temptation to "Do Something!" But the pilots asked themselves, "Is this thing still flying in the right direction?" The answer was yes--it was headed for the moon. They let the lights glow

as they addressed the individual problems, and watched orange and red lights blink out, one by one. That's something to think about in any pressure situation. If your thing is still flying, think first, and then act. That's exactly what the other disciple did. He didn't hare into the tomb; he waited and thought first and when the time came for him to follow Simon Peter into the tomb, it is simply stated that 'he saw and believed'.

Wonderful: an emphatic statement of belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or was it? Until recently I thought it was, until I read verse 9 again and just like the other disciple

resisted the temptation to rush in, and instead to think. It says in verse 9, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead”. For some reason I had failed to take that sentence seriously as it stood. So, of course, that raises the question, if the disciple did not equate the grave clothes with resurrection then what was he seeing and believing? Well, as always, John does not leave us in the dark for long if we are willing to keep our eyes on the bigger picture. Remember back in John 11 we read the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus’ beloved friend

Lazarus. Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and when he came out his hand and feet were bound with strips of cloth and his face was wrapped in a cloth. The other disciple would have witnessed that quite outstanding event and no doubt when he approached a different tomb a wee while later he would have remembered the bound Lazarus. But what did he see here? - a head cloth and wrappings separated, and no body. I have no doubt that the other disciple believed that Jesus was not dead; that's what he was believing in, but it wasn't resurrection that was in his thoughts but the

goal of Jesus' destination, being with his heavenly Father. It was not resurrection that was foremost for the disciple but the ascension of Jesus to the Father. Now this distinction may seem a strange one to make and we must not be too dogmatic here. John in his Gospel wants us to hold the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus together as a unified whole. When he quoted the term "lifted up" from the lips of Jesus earlier in his Gospel, he had the lifting up of the cross, the rising of Jesus from the dead and the departure of Jesus from the earth to meet his Father, all in mind at once.



These events must not be prised apart but must be understood as a unity. So, if indeed, the other disciple has not grasped the understanding that a resurrection has taken place, it seems that he has believed that Jesus and his Father are now together and so is on his way to understanding the complete picture of Jesus' 'lifting up'. This understanding, I think, is backed up by Jesus' later response to Mary's move to embrace him when she discovered that he was not in fact the gardener. Jesus commanded her not to hold him because he had not yet ascended. But the message that

Mary was to bring to the other disciple was to be that he was in the process of ascending.

Now, none of this is simply an intricate play on words and ideas. That would serve no purpose to John in his careful telling of the story. What is the point of this emphasis on the ascension in the classic account of resurrection? Well, it's in the two sets of words, 'my' and 'your' we find the answer. "I am ascending to *my* Father and *your* Father, to *my* God and *your* God", Jesus said. The ascension of Jesus, from his lifting up on the cross and his rising from the grave, has

placed him in the position of authority to extend a new relationship between his heavenly Father and his friends on earth. The veil that was necessary to shield humanity from the face of Almighty God has fallen on the ground in the tomb. The face to face relationship that Jesus now has with his Father ensures that a real relationship is opened for us too. The other disciple saw and believed.

We can live only in relationships. We need each other and we need our God. A rather crude and cruel experiment was carried out by Emperor Frederick, who ruled the Roman

Empire in the thirteenth century. He wanted to know what human beings' original language was: Hebrew, Greek, or Latin? He decided to isolate a few infants from the sound of the human voice. He reasoned that they would eventually speak the natural tongue of humankind. Wet nurses who were sworn to absolute silence were obtained, and though it was difficult for them, they abided by the rule. The infants never heard a word -- not a sound from a human voice. Within several months they were all dead.

It is the new relationship between God and man established in the new creation by the

new Adam, Jesus Christ, that brings life. Therefore the other disciple was absolutely right when he looked into the tomb and equated the non appearance of Jesus with his place somewhere else. May we too have faith to believe that he has gone to his Father and our Father, to his God and our God. Amen.