



Easter - April 8, 2012
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Loaded Questions: Who Are You Looking For? John 20:1-18

A reporter in Time magazine once wrote, "...death is the one great adventure of which there are no surviving accounts; death, by definition, is what happens to somebody else." (August 8, 1994) Well... we are here on this Easter morning because we believe he's wrong. There is a surviving account. If you want to meet someone who has been there, done that with death, Jesus is your guy. I welcome you to this celebration of the living Jesus. Let's listen again to the moment that changed forever.

I will never forget the morning I ran to the empty tomb of Jesus. My son Cooper and I were in Jerusalem. On the day that we were to leave, Cooper said, "Dad, do you think we could go see the tomb of Jesus one more time?" I said, "We'll have to run!" So we did...in the darkness of that morning, everyone still in bed, shops closed, we ran through the empty streets of Jerusalem so that we could visit the tomb one last time. There were lots of things going through my mind. "How awesome is this? My son and I are running to the tomb of Jesus! I hope I can find it! I hope the bus doesn't leave without us!"

What do you suppose was going through Peter and John's mind as they made their dash for the tomb of Jesus? John was in better shape than Peter. He can't help bragging that he won the race; he beat out-of-shape Peter to the tomb. But John stopped at the door and waited. Peter came wheezing up behind him, saw his opportunity and rushed past John like a bull in the china shop, right into the tomb.

John followed him in and offers this simple testimony: "I saw... and I believed." "The minute I saw that neat, empty tomb, everything Jesus had told us about His rising from the dead all came back to me. And I knew it was true." What does John do next? He heads home for the very first Easter brunch. I doubt that he had ham... but he believed, and he went home.

What about Peter? Peter saw all the same evidence, but John tells us only that **he** believed—not Peter. Why would that be? Perhaps guilt? Do you remember what Peter did the night Jesus was arrested? He denied him... three times. He was so afraid that he cursed and swore that he'd never met Jesus. Then he looked across the courtyard and saw the Lord looking back at him. Peter, the chief apostle...

Peter, the “rock” crumbled when Jesus needed him most. And now, he could hardly deal with the possibility of the resurrection because he was so filled with regret.

John believed. Peter regretted. But what about Mary... faithful Mary? While the male disciples were hiding, faithful Mary returned to finish the work of embalming Jesus’ body. This dear woman had the honor of being the first witness to the resurrection of Christ, but she didn’t know what she was seeing!

Cyndi and I love Costco. It’s always a treasure hunt, trying to figure out where they’ve moved the stuff you like. But you know one of the best things about Costco? Samples! How many love the samples! You can go in there on a Saturday, make the rounds twice and basically get a free lunch, right? Just nibble your way around the store. How many go back for seconds? Thirds? Pretty soon you feel guilty so you come up with excuses. “This is for my wife. This is for my son. This is for my fourth cousin, twice removed!”

I love to taste. I normally don’t buy. I can knock back a stick of sausage, a sip of soup, a chunk of cheese, a dollop of dip... say thank you, and just keep on walking. I stroll around, several times maybe. I taste. I like what I taste, but I probably won’t buy.

What does that have to do with anything? It reminds me of Mary Magdalene. Mary seems to be tasting her way through this story, doesn’t she? She circles around the tomb several times, taking the whole thing in... but she doesn’t buy it. She shows up early and sees that the stone has been removed. She runs to tell the disciples that someone has stolen Jesus’ body. She returns with them to the empty tomb. She watches their response, watches them leave, and just hangs around. She is so broken-hearted that she just stands there and cries and cries. Tears swelling her eyes, she bends over to peek inside. But she can’t bring herself to go inside. She still doesn’t buy it!

She even sees things that the boys didn’t see. What? Angels! These are the **only** angels to appear in all of John’s gospel. Two of them, sitting at the head and foot of the stone bed where Jesus had lain. And for a Jew, this should have been a huge hint about who Jesus was. How many remember the first Indiana Jones movie... *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? The ark was the gold covered box that held the Ten Commandments. It sat in the Holiest Place in the Jerusalem temple. The lid of the ark was called the “Mercy Seat” because the blood of a sacrifice would be sprinkled on the lid so that God would have mercy upon his people. Well, do you remember what sat at either end of the Mercy Seat? Angels! For a Jew, it was like saying, “This, the empty tomb of Jesus, is your new Mercy Seat. The sacrifice has been paid and your sins are forgiven.”

What a powerful image. But Mary still didn’t get it! Like the other disciples, Mary heard Jesus predict His own resurrection several times! But when she saw the

stone rolled away, she didn't get it. Mary knew what the Mercy Seat looked like. But when she peeked in and saw those two angels sitting there, she didn't get the hint. But Jesus wasn't done yet. If Mary wouldn't go into the tomb, Jesus would meet her right where she was.

She heard someone behind her and turned. Not recognizing Him, she turned back to stare at the empty tomb again. Still weeping; still heartbroken. The stranger asked the same question the angels asked... plus one more. "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" "Why am I crying? Because the man who transformed my life—who set me free from dark, spiritual forces—has been murdered! Who am I looking for? I'm looking for a dead guy. A body. Someone stole it. I want to honor Him in death. It is the least I can do for Him. It is the last I can do for Him."

Do you see what I mean? Mary is tasting her way through the story. She sees but doesn't believe. She hangs around but doesn't believe. She peeks at the evidence but doesn't believe. She even talks with people who know the truth, but she doesn't believe. She is looking for a dead man. Her dreams have been shattered. She is so overcome with grief that she cannot see the truth through her tear-swollen eyes... even when she is looking right at Him!

What does it take to convince her? The voice... I'm talking about **the** Voice.

You know, four weeks ago, I finally bought something I had sampled at Costco. Cheese. I tasted it—I circled back for seconds and thirds—and then, I did something I don't usually do. I listened to the voice. She told me what it was, why it was so good and healthy and such a good bargain... and as I listened, I thought, "She's right! I must have this cheese! I've got to buy this cheese!" One month later, I'm still gnawing away at that huge block of cheese.

What was it that suddenly opened Mary's eyes? It was the voice of the risen Jesus calling her name. "Mary." Oh, she knew that voice. She recognized that voice! Jesus once described himself as a Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name and they know His voice. The minute Mary heard her name she turned back around again, looked at Him with knowing eyes and cried out, "Rabboni! Teacher!" She ran to Him. She threw her arms around His neck and nearly choked Him! She hugged and choked and cried and laughed so long that finally, Jesus had to say, "Okay, enough! Let go! You're choking me! I just rose from the dead and you are trying to kill me again! You can't hang around here hugging me. You've got work to do!" And off He sent her with the news that would change eternity. Mary was the first apostle to the apostles.

We have a big crowd this morning. I wonder, which of these three do you identify with? John? There are a lot of Johns here this morning. Many of you believe. Maybe it came easily to you; maybe you were raised with it; maybe, the minute it was presented to you, it just made sense... and you believed. So what are you going to do with this news? Hustle back home to Easter Brunch and forget about it

until the next time we get together? If you really believe that God raised Jesus from the dead—if you really believe that His empty tomb is the mercy seat of God's forgiveness—how in the world can you keep that to yourself?

Others here might identify better with Peter. You are so filled with regret that you can't accept what Jesus has done. I have a friend who would probably admit that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God. But he lives with such guilt about his past that he can't let himself believe. He thinks he is beyond saving. Why waste time believing in something that won't do him any good? Maybe you agree with him.

May I just tell you... you could not be more wrong! God is madly in love with you. There is nothing you have done that is stronger than God's love for you. Nothing you have done that is so bad that God cannot make it right. Peter betrayed Jesus... and Jesus came looking for him. Jesus is looking for you today... right now. Believe that! Receive that! Be done with that smothering sense of guilt!

Some of you believe. Some of you regret. And some here—maybe about half of us this morning—we just taste.... just nibble. Don't get me wrong: I'm so glad you are here. You are very welcome. We will take you any way and any time we can get you! But now that you think about it, doesn't your search feel a little bit like Mary's? Like Mary, you hang around. Year after year, you return. Year after year, you take another taste. Year after year you take another look. You peek inside. You listen to witnesses talk about the resurrected Jesus. You obviously like what you taste or you wouldn't come back for seconds and thirds and fourths and fifths. But for some reason, you never buy it.

Why is that? Do you know? Let me ask Jesus' question: "Who are you looking for this morning?" I don't think Mary knew who she was looking for. A dead guy? One last sweet memory? For some reason, she could not believe the evidence. But one of the great things about Mary is: she hangs in there. She doesn't give up. Verse 11 says that "Mary stood outside the tomb crying." The actual Greek word suggests that she **kept** standing. She planted herself. She took up her post. She wasn't going to leave until she had this sorted out. Good for her!

Maybe that describes you. You can't honestly say that you believe yet. It's still confusing. But you keep coming back. Year after year, you keep coming back. You haven't given up. You like what you've tasted, but you are not yet satisfied. Good for you... for hanging in there! So what would it take for you to hear Jesus calling your name? What would it take for you to suddenly see Jesus for who He is... the resurrected Lord, the Savior, the Forgiver of your sins?

Psalm 34 offers a wonderful invitation: "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good." God invites you to taste, to test and see how good He is. But the second half of the Psalm adds, "Blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him!" If you continue to nibble your way along in life, you will never be satisfied. You will always be

hungry. Only when you put your trust in Jesus—take refuge in him—can you discover what life was created to be.

Some of you, like John, do believe. You need to take your faith out into the world. The world is waiting for your incredible news! Some of you, like Peter, need to forgive yourself. You need to dare to trust that Jesus' forgiveness is greater than all the wrong that weighs you down. You are forgiven in Christ... do you hear me? You are forgiven!

But what about the tasters in the crowd? Is there anything that we could do to help you stop nibbling and sit down to a feast? Maybe. You could come back next Sunday and meet Jesus again. Or, we have this packet for you. Ushers will have them at the door for those who ask. A helpful booklet, a gospel of Mark. Maybe studying a little more about Jesus will clear things up for you. Would you invest that much effort in something that might change your life?

Or if you are feeling particularly gutsy, how about this: starting April 26, I will teach a class called *Christianity Explored*. It examines who Jesus is, why He came, what He did and the difference it makes. It is **not** a class for believers... for Bible thumpers. It is a class for tasters and strugglers and beginners. I would love to lead you on this journey. If you are interested, ask Ellis or Rachel at the Connect Center.

But maybe... maybe Jesus has already called your name this morning. Did you hear Him? It happens every Easter. Some who have been tasting for years for some reason see or hear the Easter story in a way they've never done before and suddenly it all snaps into focus. I was talking last week with a straight-shooting, no-nonsense business guy who came to see me. His life has been a stressful mess and he just stopped coming to church. But after a while, he missed it and for the last couple months, he's been back.

At the end of every Sunday service, I invite everyone to raise their hands to receive a blessing. This man told me that one Sunday recently, as he raised his hands, he looked up... and he had a vision of Jesus, His hands lifted up blessing him. I could see that he was reluctant to tell me this story. He's not a "vision" sort of guy. When it happened, he tried to explain it away. "This is crazy," he thought. "I must be imagining it!" But he knew what he had seen, and in the days to come, he tells me that he experienced peace and confidence and hope that he has not had for years. He is now convinced that Jesus met him that morning... called out to him personally with the blessing he most needed to receive.

Do you need a blessing from the risen Christ today? Would you like the risen Jesus to call your name today? Who knows, maybe this Easter morning will be the day when finally you go from tasting to feasting.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. Describe the difference between Peter and John's response to the empty tomb and Mary's. How do you account for it?
 2. Pastor Mark talked about "tasters" and "clingers." What did he mean? Which more closely describes you and why? What do you need to do about it?