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FBC | WJ  
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**Running Towards Resurrection**  
**John 20:1-18**

Each year we run the proverbial race that is the season of Lent and Holy Week as a reminder of the grueling race of discipleship with Jesus. As my weakened voice might indicate this morning, the race can be rough, filled with roadblocks, detours, danger, denial, and eventually death. But this morning, we gather with Jesus' first disciples at his tomb to learn what we were running toward all along: resurrection.

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene is the first to visit Jesus' tomb, three days after his death on a cross. Who knows what she expected to find, but as she arrived she discovered that the stone that had covered the tomb had been removed. Mary assumed that she was witnessing a grave robbery, a common occurrence in those days, especially of popular religious and political figures. She ran to tell Simon Peter and "the other disciple," also known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," a. k. a. "John." Her words were what Eugene Peterson has called, 'the message that fired the starting pistol that sent Peter and John running off on their resurrection-morning race.' What Peter and John discovered as they investigated further, Peter first and then John, was that not only was Jesus' body not where it had been laid after his death, but the linen wrappings were still there—which thieves would not have taken the trouble to remove—and the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was neatly folded up in a place by itself, like someone would do if they had made up their bed. While it was clear that this was no grave robbing, the disciples were not quite sure what to make of what they saw. John "believed," at least Mary's story that Jesus wasn't there, but the gospel writer tells us that "they did not understand the scripture" or Jesus' own words that he would rise from the dead. So, they went home filled with awe, wonder, and a bit of confusion.

This is par for the course for the disciples, especially in John's gospel: the disciples come to understand through an initial failure to do so.<sup>1</sup> This is the case of Mary Magdalene, Peter, and even the "beloved disciple." In response to the empty tomb, Mary

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard S. Sloyan, *John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching And

expresses one of the decisive misunderstandings of Jesus' ministry: where he comes from and where he is going (7:33-36; 8:21-23).<sup>2</sup> It's one the most important question we have of Jesus and our own lives. Where did Jesus come from and where is he going? Where did *we* come from and where are we going? It's the one question to which we all seek the answer in life. However, it's not an easy question to answer. Even Jesus' first followers seem to be unclear about this, both for themselves and for Jesus. On the first Easter morning, it is still **not** initially clear to Mary, Peter, and John, who see the empty tomb, or the disciples who hear about it from them, where this journey with Jesus is leading.

We can identify. We struggle with death, what to say about it, what to do in response to it. In general we try to avoid it, thinking that somehow some way we can continue to cheat death and our inevitable encounter with it. Even more so, we struggle with the questions about our life as we know what awaits us in death. Where did we come from and where are we going? We struggle with the empty tomb, with signs of life and resurrection. Where did Jesus come from, and where is he going? Is he for real? The virgin birth? The story of his ministry and resurrection?

Will Willimon tells the story of attending a funeral for a college professor where the preacher attempted to be as generic and vague as possible in respect to the professor's "non-believing, theologically non-descript family." The best the speaker could offer was a memorialization of the deceased, "Name me another scholar who has contributed as much to the field of organic chemistry. Recently, I saw one of his 1964 monographs still be referred to in a peer-reviewed journal!" Willimon's colleague leaned over to him at that moment and said, "Yep, and he's dead too."<sup>3</sup>

We can't avoid death. All of our lives are leading to it, one way or another. We will all die. And yet we come here on this Easter Sunday, and any other Sunday throughout the year, and experiencing what the Early Church declared as mini-Easters. If we are honest, we must confess that we don't initially always find faith in the resurrected

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<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *John*, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 840.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Willimon, "Easter Story," *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 43 No. 2 (April, May, June 2015), 8.

Lord, just like Mary and Peter and John. We are not sure about where this proverbial race with Jesus is leading. How did this all get started? Where are we going?

The good news is that it's not up to us. Resurrection is not our doing. It's God's. The empty tomb reveals that we are not running toward resurrection as much as resurrection comes to meet us in the risen Lord.

Mary came back to the empty tomb, and all she could do was cry. But when she made her way into the tomb, she saw two white figures. Maybe at first thinking that her eyes were playing tricks on her, she wiped her tear-filled eyes and saw that there were indeed two angels sitting where Jesus once lay. They asked her why she was crying—it's obvious to them what has happened. She still thought that this was a grave robbery. Then, another figure appeared, whom Mary thought was either the grave robber or the gardener. Maybe it was both. It was Jesus, the one who robbed the grave of death and who was fulfilling his own words to bring forth life from the seed of death that had been planted. Mary finally recognized the man as Jesus when he called her by name. She replied to him, "Teacher," and hugged his feet. Jesus told her not to hold on to him, but to go and tell the other disciples of her experience. So, she did.

Mary, Peter, and John; they all were running toward resurrection, even though they didn't know it at first. Jesus had healed Mary from "seven demons," likely some form of severe mental illness and other various "demons" that she couldn't seem to shake. Peter denied Jesus, and was dealing with all of the baggage that came from the guilt of lying about and abandoning his best friend and revered teacher. John was identified by his relationship with Jesus, yet even he did not believe in the resurrection after seeing the evidence of the empty tomb. It wouldn't seem like it, but they were all running toward hope. They were running the proverbial race of life with Jesus. Along the way, they experienced great challenges, disappointments, letdowns, and tragedies, even death. What the empty tomb of Jesus and the resurrected Jesus himself reveals is that when we experience death and think that death is the end of the road, Jesus gives us resurrection. On the proverbial race of discipleship with Jesus, we are always running toward resurrection, because Jesus, the resurrected Lord is running towards us. I don't know why you have come here today. Maybe you're curious. Maybe it's a tradition. Maybe you're broken. Maybe you are hoping to see Jesus. Regardless of why you are

here today, regardless of where you think you are going in life, regardless of where you have been, Jesus gives to us the gift of resurrection and life.

Philip was born with Downs Syndrome. Even though, he was aware of his differences from other children, he found a loving community in his church's Sunday School class, which he attended faithfully every week. He was in the third grade class with nine other eight-year olds. In this class, Philip's teacher taught this group of eight-year olds to love each other as best they could, to learn, laugh, and play together. And they really cared about one another. For Easter one year, his teacher gave them plastic Easter Eggs and they went outside and each find a symbol for new life, put it into the egg, and brought it back to the classroom. They would then open and share their new life symbols and surprises, one by one. Of course, it was organized chaos as the children ran all around the church grounds, gathering their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all the eggs on a table, and then the teacher began to open them. All the children gathered around the table. In one was a flower, and in another there was a little butterfly. Finally, the teacher opened the last one. There was nothing inside. The children, as eight-year olds will, said, "That's not fair. That's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right." Then the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down. "It's mine, Philip said. It's mine." And the children said, "You didn't do it right, Philip. There's nothing there!" "I did so do it right!" Philip said. "I did do it right. Jesus' tomb is empty!" Philip died shortly thereafter, from an infection and other health complications as a result of his Down's Syndrome. At his memorial service, nine eight-year old children along with their Sunday School teacher marched up to the altar, and laid an empty egg on Philip's coffin as a symbol of the resurrected Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

One theologian said this about resurrection

"Everyone is an amateur when it comes to making sense of the resurrection. It takes us all by surprise. ... Resurrection must work its way toward us, the same that the risen Christ came to Mary Magdalene at the tomb." Resurrection is "something strange and wonderful that comes to us—a gift."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/easter/>

<sup>5</sup> Willimon, "Easter Story," 7.

Resurrection is something God does in Jesus, rather than something we do. Jesus has been raised from the dead. Today, he comes to us, calls us by name, and gives us the gift toward which we are all running as God's children: resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.