

When Nothing Means Something

Text:

John 20:1-18

A sermon preached by
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John 20:1-18

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' 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 hold on to 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.



Sim Bhuller is 7'5" tall, 359 lbs, was born in India, as a child moved to Canada with his family, and has now been signed by the LA Kings as the first person of Indian ethnicity to play in the NBA. 7'5" – that's 2 feet taller than me – now *that's* something!



Scott Kelly, an American astronaut who is, along with his astronaut twin brother Mark Kelly, 51 years old, has just travelled to the International Space Station to spend a full year in space. Now *that's* something!



Louis Jordan, 37, was rescued this week 200 miles off the North Carolina coast, after surviving for 66 days after his boat capsized several times – he says he ate fish he caught by trailing dirty clothes in the ocean, and by catching rainwater in a bucket. Now *that's* something!



Steve Clarke, a Havertown resident and teacher at Holy Child School in Rosemont holds a Guinness World Record for the

fastest time in carving a pumpkin face – 16.47 seconds. Now *that's* something!



Helen Dugan from Lenexa, Kansas is a martial arts black belt who at 80 years old can still put the moves on someone a quarter her age – her program, Champs Achievers, specializes in teaching people with special needs like autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and developmental delays. Now *that's* something!



I suspect most of us are awed and amazed by accomplishments and achievements like this. In fact, I heard something recently. Do you know what the most often stolen book from public libraries is? I guessed *The Bible*, but in actuality it's – *The Guinness Book of World Records*.

What is it about these kind of stories – sometimes amazing, sometimes inspiring, sometimes just plain weird stories – that intrigue us? The fact is, it's that we as humans quite simply crave a good story.



The thesis of Jonathan Gottschall’s book, “The Storytelling Animal,” is that human beings are natural storytellers—that we can’t help telling stories, and that we turn things that aren’t really stories into stories because we like narratives so much.

Everything—faith, science, love—needs a story for people to find it plausible. (<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/can-science-explain-why-we-tell-stories>)

We love stories. We tell stories. We make up stories even when they stretch the facts a little bit. We like stories so much that we’ll pay big money to those who write the best ones – Stephen King, Nora Roberts, John Grisham, Dan Brown, Tom Clancy, Hilary Mantel, and others. We like stories, we need stories, we *crave* stories.



So why isn’t the Bible the most stolen book from the library? It has perhaps the greatest and most amazing stories of all times. Some based on facts, some completely made up, some stretching reality to get the listener’s attention, some so miraculous and amazing that though they might be true we have a hard time believing them. No matter their derivation or their factuality, each

story points to a reality of life. That's perhaps the beauty of the Bible.

And that's the appeal of this person we know as Jesus. He was one of the great storytellers of our world. And he was the object and subject of some of the greatest stories we have ever known. And always, the Jesus story points to the realities of our life.



Sharon on mounted flannel board: Item 1886

5,000 people fed with 2 loaves of bread and 5 fish – what better story to point to our need to fill the bellies of the hungry of this world. Touching the untouchable and healing broken lives by bringing them back to the wholeness of society – what better way to teach us to eliminate barriers and create wholeness in our communities. Calming the storm while those in the boat are terrified that they will die – a story reminding us that we have nothing to fear when we know God is with us. Ignoring the weeping and wailing of a village to raise a little girl from what seems like her deathbed – showing us that we must never give up hope.

And here this morning we are drawn together to hear again one of those great stories, amazing stories, one of those moments when if we can allow into our heart the truth beneath the hype of a story it can change us over and over again.

Mary Magdalene walks to the tomb of Jesus to prepare his body for a proper burial rather than the hasty way in which he was placed before the Sabbath. There she sees that the stone had been removed. What is the story? Fear, anger, anxiety, unbearable

grief, tears and confusion – these all flood Mary’s mind and heart – so much like those emotions we experience when a loved one dies. Though she knows he is at peace, her heart is heavy at her own loss of these past days. She doesn’t know anything more but that the stone is moved. She turns and runs.

In her confusion and fear, she jumps to a conclusion. “They have taken him away and we do not know where they have laid him,” she tells Peter and another disciple. She doesn’t know – she never looked inside – she never searched for Jesus. Peter and the other run to the tomb – the disciple gets there first, looks in, and sees only the linen cloth that had wrapped Jesus. Peter arrives a second later, enters the tomb, sees the cloth and the head covering – but no body. The other disciple went in and seeing nothing there, they believed. What did they believe? They believed that the body of Jesus was no longer there, writes John, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” They went home.

What do we do when faced with disappointment? What do we do when faced with the unbelievable? How do we feel when what we expected to be there was not there, when the sure and certain truth of life – the finality of Jesus’ death in this story, but any other moment of life’s disappointments in our own lives – when that truth is destroyed by a momentary glance? They – we – go on our way dejected, saddened, shaking our heads in confusion. Once again, life has confounded us. They gave up. They went home.



So far in this story, we have nothing. There’s nothing there but an empty hole in the side of a hill and some folded up linen in the

corner. Nothing, really. Yet that nothing means so much, and *that's* really something. When nothing amazes and astonishes. When the nothing that has happened means something *that* truly matters.

The story continues. A weeping Mary stands at the tomb – broken, tired, lost. She seems to be a woman without hope, with no sense that there can be anything beyond the state of mind she's in right now. She is, like any of us faced with a similar emotional moment of grief, ready to give up. There's nothing there. There never will be anything more worth living for.

Yet then there is something. Into this moment of nothingness, two messengers dressed in white. And then the gardener – who she thinks is the gardener – asks her why she is crying. “If you've moved him, tell me where he is so I can take him away.” Mary wants the body, she wants to see her friend one last time before the finality of it all sets in. The gardener isn't just a gardener, though, is he? It's Jesus – and the story suddenly is filled with more than nothing. Jesus is somehow alive!



Now *that* nothing *means* something!

The original Greek word that we have translated into English as “tomb” is *mnéma* (mnay'-mah) which comes from the root word that means “memory.” So really what Mary has told this gardener is "They have taken Jesus out of my memory!" What she receives back from the gardener is something which will stay

in her – and our collective – memory forever. “Mary.” Jesus isn't just a memory; our loved ones aren't just memories. Jesus is alive!

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and saw him and called him out of all the affection that was welling up inside her, "Rabbouni!" Teacher, a name by which I'm sure she has called him many times. Yet it's really more intimate than just “teacher” which would have been “rabbi.” It's more like “my great one” or even more intimate, "my sweet dear teacher, my very own."

The tomb is more than just a place of memory now. It is a place from which the story can continue. Like any good story it's not over with what might feel like a dead end. The story is always available for retelling, for re-interpretation, for stretching and sharing and teaching and learning.



Mary took this moment of new memory and returned to see the group that had become Jesus' closest circle of followers. She took what was now in her heart and she poured it out to those who might listen. She retold the story of the empty tomb – she retold the story of the nothingness that she encountered and how powerful a moment that nothing became.

These are the same people who when they had encountered the nothingness of the tomb interpreted it as simply nothingness. Peter and the other disciple saw nothing so the story was over for them. “And they returned to their homes,” the English translation tells us. But again the original is a little more nuanced than that – it is *autos* (ow-tos'; αὐτοῦς) which literally means "themselves."

They found nothing at the burial place, “they returned to themselves,” they simply went off to ponder what had happened, maybe just back to life as it had been.



So here is the moment when nothing either means nothing or it means something.

Every year we come to this moment on our church’s calendar, we have been through 40n days of reflection and discernment, we have journeyed through the ashes and the palms and the arrest and the tears and the beating and the crucifixion. We come to that part of the story when the last breath is breathed, the body is laid to rest, the tomb is sealed. We have come to that moment when not just once a year but really every week we come back to this place of memory and we find the nothingness of the empty tomb and we recall with great passion and emotion the story that never ends.

You want to hear about great accomplishments and amazing stories? This is the story beyond all stories. Now *this* is nothing which means something!

Go. Tell the nothingness of this story over and over again in the living of your life. Christ is risen!

Amen.