

**April 21, 2019**  
**What If?**  
**John 20:1-18**

Some things are predictable: you hit a ball with a bat, it moves. You punch a brick wall it hurts. You die, you're dead. End of story. But what if, you hit the ball and the ball goes right through the bat? Or the brick wall is as soft as a pillow? Or you die, and ...? What if the natural order of things changes?

Jesus' friends and followers have been stunned by recent events. A week ago, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. The same crowd that had welcomed Him with loud "Hosannas" last Sunday was shouting "Crucify Him!" by Friday. The disciples saw their hopes, and dreams brutalized and executed before their eyes.

When Jesus' lifeless body was taken from the cross Friday evening and the huge rock thudded shut across the entrance to the tomb, their hopes were crushed. You're dead and you're dead. It was finished. Over. Done.

Saturday – the Jewish Sabbath – the disciples cowered in obscure places, fearful for their lives, and certain their dreams died with Jesus. Finished. Over. Done.

***At Dawn ...***

The story picks up early on Sunday, the first day of the week – at dawn. Dawn is the coldest time of day. It was cold temperature-wise. But imagine how cold the hearts of the women who went to the tomb must be. They are expecting a tomb sealed with a huge stone. The other gospel writers add Mary Magdalene and other women are coming with spices to anoint the dead body. It is a brave thing to do. A Roman patrol is posted on guard. Anyone associated with Jesus is risking their lives. As the women approach, they wonder, "*Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?*" (Mark 16:3).

When Mary gets to the tomb, the Roman guard is gone, the stone has been removed from the entrance, and the tomb is empty. Their hearts, which had been heavy and cold, get heavier and colder. They assume the Romans or Jews had taken the body. Perhaps they would display Jesus' corpse for public ridicule? Even more dejected and depressed than before, Mary runs to find Peter and John. Imagine her emotional state when she finds them.

John and Peter come running. Peter is the first one to go into the empty tomb. He "*saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head; the cloth was folded by itself, separate from the linen.*" He is confused.

John is the one who begins to wonder: if someone had stolen the body would they not have taken it wrappings and all? They certainly would not have *folded* the cloth. Is God, the One who brought light into darkness, bringing life into death? "*He saw and he believed*"(20:8).

Notice the little detail that the head linen is neatly folded. Out of the pain, suffering, disorder, and mess of life and death, things are being set right again. Order is coming into the chaos. It's the beginning of a new reality in which everything is just as God created it to be. Easter has come – and with it a new order of things – who would have predicted it?

Peter and John go home, trying to make sense of it all. Peter doesn't get it yet (*"They still did not understand ..."*). John *"saw and he believed"* ... at least a little bit.

Mary stays, crying. For her, the world is as cold as ice. Her heart is frozen. When two strangers speak to her she tells them Jesus is dead; His body is stolen; life as she knew it – and hoped it would be – is over. We know they are angels, she apparently didn't. Angels are interesting beings in the Bible. They appear in certain situations, like when people are afraid and have given up hope. God's presence often comes in the most amazing ways when people feel like there is no tomorrow.

Then another person asks her again, *"Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"* She thinks it's the gardener. She wonders if he knows who took the body and where it is now.

It is when He speaks her **name** – He knows **her** name! – she recognizes Him. It's Jesus. What tone of voice did Jesus use? Perhaps it is a combination of greeting, consolation, invitation and gentle rebuke ('Come on. Don't you know me?'). She knows Him. And yet she doesn't. He's the same. But He's different. He is alive. But with a different kind of life.

Jesus knows her name. Jesus knows your name. And my name. And the names of each and every person who is dear to you. Life is different when God knows your name. You are never alone.

It is significant Mary thinks Jesus is a gardener. God is re-establishing a garden (like Eden), bringing order out of chaos, the perfect from imperfect – new creation. Like the empty shroud and the folded linen, this is a dramatic statement that something new is happening here. Creation is being redeemed and restored. Jesus has come to uproot the weeds and the thorns and to replace them with rich harvests and glorious flowers, things as they were meant to be.

Think about that garden – Eden. It was the place where God and his people enjoyed an open, free, joyful, perfect relationship. Jesus is re-establishing that open, free relationship.

Mary wants to hug Jesus (20:17). But with Easter a whole new order of things has come. Mary's way of relating to Jesus will be different than it was before. He won't be travelling around Galilee and Judea, walking the highways and byways, sharing meals with His disciples, teaching them on hillsides, arguing with the Pharisees. Yes, for the next few days He will be visible as He was.

But Mary and the other disciples will have the privilege – and the challenge – of finding a new way to relate to Jesus. They would prefer to cling to Him as a physical person. But as a physical Person, Jesus is limited in time and space. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will not be

limited to one time, one place, or one relationship. He will be able to be present with all people everywhere all the time. This is what He had tried to teach His followers over the past few weeks (John 14-17). This is so much better. Jesus is with each one of us through His Spirit, always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Then Jesus tells Mary *"Go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"* So? If you had been reading the gospel through in one sitting to this point, you would notice something radical and new here ...

- Up to this point Jesus has called His followers "disciples," "servants," and even "friends." What word does Jesus use in this new order of things? *"My brothers ..."* In this new world, we are brothers and sisters of Jesus – we are family.
- Up to this point Jesus has referred to God as "the Father" and "my Father." What does Jesus say now? *'I am ascending to my Father and **your** Father, to my God and **your** God.'* In this new world, we are children of God – we are **HIS** family.

### ***A New Order of Things***

Jesus is risen from the dead. The linen is even folded. The garden is being restored. A perfect relationship is being restored. That sort of thing doesn't happen every day.

Jesus is alive. What does it mean? The power of death is broken. Evil is robbed of its power. *"Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died ... O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... Thank God. He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:20, 55-56). Death is no longer the great terror; it's now the doorway to life with Jesus.

Easter gives us a glimpse through a telescope, so we see our certain hope for the future, close up. We see the hope – the certain hope – of resurrection life one day, some day.

Easter helps us get the end in view – life with Jesus. We don't bumble along through life until one day we end up either in a grave or some vague disembodied heaven. Our ultimate future is that we will be raised to new life in God's new world.

***With the end in view – life with Jesus – life here and now is not all there is.*** Life now matters, but it is not our ultimate destiny. We are, as it were, living through a long winter semester at school, waiting with anticipation for the summer holidays. The days can seem dark and cold. The nights darker and colder. We want to do our best at our work, school, life now – we do want to live with excellence and passion – but we also anticipate summer, the holidays, rest, and a great future.

***With the end in view – life with Jesus – God knows us and we can know God.*** We are not journeying through life alone. The risen Jesus is with us through His Holy Spirit. He is with us through His people. He is always with us.

When we are at work, God is with us. When we are playing with our friends/children/grandchildren, God is with us. When we are in the cancer ward, God is with us. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us.

***With the end in view – life with Jesus – we want other people to know Him and follow Him, too, to be part of the party.*** Easter is good news. It's not about rules and regulations. It's about new life and new freedom to know God and be known by God. This news is too good to keep to ourselves. We don't want to be pushy or obnoxious, but we do want to invite others to know the same hope we have.

Michael Frost calls us to live "questionable lives." The kind of life that evokes questions from our friends about why we live the way we live, love the way we love, give the way we give, and care the way we care. Frost suggests a couple of practical habits we may want to try:

- Give some words of affirmation, do an act of kindness, give a gift, spend some quality time, give an (appropriate) hug. Bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.
- Make a friend. Eat/have coffee/talk with three people this week at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

We are (to quote Michael Frost again) to "surprise the world" by being a blessing, by being friendly, and by simply living our faith.

- Can you bless three people this week?
- Can you have three conversations with people this week?

***With end in view – life with Jesus – we live life to the fullest!*** We take ourselves and our lives seriously, but not too seriously. We know this is not all there is – it's a pale preview of life with Jesus. So we live this life with a certain swagger, knowing this is not the be all and end all of everything. We know God is always with us. Nothing and no one can separate us from His amazing grace. Life ought to be a party.

What if the natural order of things changes? What if Easter is real? What if Jesus actually did rise from the dead? What if we actually can have a restored and renewed relationship with God? What if life is not so predictable, but in the best of ways? What if God is actually doing surprising things? How then should we live?

©2019 by Bruce Martin  
First Baptist Church  
1614 – 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
(403) 327-2082  
[bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)