

Easter Sunrise
John 20:1-18
“Risen”

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”
“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don't know where they have put him.” 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”
Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). 17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

““Is she sleeping?” Kate whispers. “She’s just watching Cash yonder,” the girls says. We can hear the saw in the board. It sounds like snoring.”” What is she watching? Addie Bundren is watching her son Cash as he carefully makes her own coffin. This is a section of William Faulkner’s masterpiece titled “As I Lay Dying”.

The novel has a seemingly simple theme—getting the coffin of Addie, the mother of five children, from the family farm to the cemetery in Jefferson Mississippi for her burial. The mission generates a complex set of responses, all written as the thoughts and words in the first person, ranging from family members’ diverse opinions to those of outsiders in the community.

And the responses are varied, as to be expected. I mean, after all, death is one of the most influential and painful experiences that the living are forced to deal with. You, no doubt, have seen it. You have done it, or I can promise you that you will. Some people turn inwards. A usually talkative person becomes eerily quiet as they try to untangle the strings in their mind. The pain of the current while remembering the good of times that are in the past. Others focus on the physical, less complicated world. Let’s just focus on the practical things we have to do in the present, right in front of us; I mean, the painful thoughts will eventually go away. Others attach themselves to others in tears and wailing, hoping that someone else near them can soothe the sting that is felt so viscerally.

Those friends of Jesus, after the escape from the garden and leaving from Golgotha, were not able to escape the grapple with the death of their teacher. They were not able to leave the pain at the foot of the cross. They have taken Jesus' body to the tomb. The disciples are lost and holed up in the city of Jerusalem, trying to make sense of the three-year journey that now seems to be suddenly at its end. The women were in tears, and they wept. And on this morning, early, Mary goes to the tomb to see the body. Those close to him are sad. They cry. They have prepared him with spices. They feel pain and loss.

Why is this so difficult? In that stream-of-consciousness novel, the simple idea of getting to a funeral exposes a central theme of the book. What's in the coffin? What is in that coffin? Is it a body? Just a heap of flesh, which means nothing more than the planks of wood around it? Is it mom? Is it still mom after days in the Mississippi heat, and the flesh stinks? What is in the coffin?

Those close to Jesus were probably asking the same question. What's in the tomb? Is it Jesus? Is it the one who I heard speak and preach, the one who called me? Or is it just a body? Just bones suspended in place?

It becomes a far more important question because of those things that Jesus had said during those times he was alive. Jesus had said that he was the very Son of God. He had said that he had come to grant life eternal. He had said that all who believed in him would never die. He said that he was coming to take away the entire world's sins. And now, none of those seem trustworthy. He's no longer here. He's silent inside a grave. Maybe it was all a lie, a failure, a great giant disappointment.

And some of those things would have been true. St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17-18: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost."

Think of the implications for that. If Jesus in that tomb was just a body and nothing more. Just a body and nothing more remarkable. Just a corpse, never to rise again. We are still in our sins. If Jesus had not been raised, then those journeys of ours taking our coffins to wherever they might rest is a very traumatic thing indeed. Because that body is just a body. It is just a clot of blood that once breathed. The only thing we have is lifeless version of someone we loved. Is the reason for living just getting ready for being dead for a long time? All that remains are our memories of them, soon to be forgotten in time. All that is there is a body that will slowly disintegrate into the atoms around and the soil itself being more alive than they are.

All that would be left would be the knowledge that sins are not paid for. Pain, loss, and destruction. Death would be the most painful of permanent realities. The only thing that is there in that coffin is a reminder of the disastrous end to it all.

But on that Easter morning, Mary went to the tomb. She expects to see a corpse that she used to call Jesus. But instead, she hears: "**Mary... Jesus said, "Do not hold on to**

me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'”

It's Jesus. It's Jesus risen from the dead. And as she gazes upon his face, she and we become sure of some ever-important things. We are able to answer that question of, “What was in that tomb?” In that tomb was laid Jesus Christ, who was true God and true man. What was laid in that tomb was a full man, who was able to die. What was in that tomb was true God, able to conquer death. What was laid in that tomb was the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, including me. What was in that tomb was only a temporary hardship that was soon over. What was in the tomb gave way to everlasting life.

You remember this, dear Christian when you are forced to walk up to a coffin or an urn. Because while the world may try to debate what is in that coffin, is it just a body? Is it Grandpa? Mom? My son? Is all we have left this body and our memories? You know better. You know because of Easter. That body is just a temporary hardship. Because my risen Lord has shown me that he has paid for sins. My risen Lord has shown me that he can and has conquered death. My risen Lord has shown me that that person has not ceased to exist, but they are waiting in eager expectation for the day when the disintegrated molecules, scattered across the universe, will be gathered with expert precision back together and back with their soul. I know that that corpse will be filled with life once again one day. They and all who have faith in Jesus, will live and breathe and rejoice in the perfect joys of heaven.

Dear brothers and sisters, fellow worshippers of the Lord Jesus Christ. There will come a time when, as God deems it fit, you will stare death in the face as it walks with unstoppable steps towards your bedside. You do not need to fear. You don't need to fear your coffin, because you know what was in that tomb. I don't need to fear my coffin, because what was in that tomb was my Savior from sin. I don't need to fear my coffin, because what was in that tomb was my Lord, who will call my soul to heaven. I don't need to fear my coffin, because my coffin will not be where I remain forever.

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.