

Easter Vigil and Easter Day

EMPTY TOMB: BAD NEWS OR GOOD?

John 20:1-18

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Analysis by Bill White

1Early 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. 2So 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." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together; but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and 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. 13They 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." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus 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." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus 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.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

NOTE: As most of you know, this method of unpacking the pericope begins with identifying in the biblical text the person with the problem and then applying the Crossings diagnosis-prognosis paradigm to that person. Clearly, Mary Magdalene is the main person with a problem in this text. However, because there are already two excellent examples of "crossing" Mary Magdalene with this text archived at Crossings.org/theology (Easter Day for the years 2004 and 2000), below I attempt a "crossing" with the disciple whom Jesus loved.

DIAGNOSIS: Empty

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Empty Tomb—Bad News*

The observable problem for the disciple whom Jesus loved is that Jesus' tomb is empty. Not only is Jesus dead, now his body is gone! Mary Magdalene has brought the bad news, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (v. 2).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Empty Tomb—Empty Faith*

Even worse, now comes the temptation to distrust Jesus: As he

arrives at the tomb and peers inside, he is tempted to trust the visible evidence that Jesus is dead and gone instead of trusting the Jesus who had been telling him such things as, "But now I am going to him who sent me"; and, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer" (John 16:5, 7ff). Will he cling to faith in Christ or trust his eyes and ears?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Empty Tomb–Empty Life*

Worse still, as he stands outside of the tomb gazing in, if the disciple whom Jesus loved insists on believing that the empty tomb means Jesus is dead and gone, he will be.

PROGNOSIS: Full

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Empty Tomb–New Life*

But the news of the empty tomb is not the bad news that Jesus is dead and gone. Rather, it is the Good News that Christ is alive and gone, having been raised from the dead by the Father, just as Jesus had said: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:13-17).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Empty Tomb–Full Faith

By completing his glorification through the cross and grave and returning to his Father, Jesus makes his Father the beloved disciple's Father also; Jesus' God is the beloved disciple's God. Indeed, Jesus' glorification makes the disciple his brother (and us Jesus' sisters and brothers!). The beloved disciple enters the empty tomb, sees the grave clothes, and believes (v. 8). He becomes the first believer in Jesus' resurrection without hearing Jesus call his name and without seeing the raised Christ! As Jesus will soon tell Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Empty Tomb–Good News

Best of all, having been given real faith, the beloved disciple now sees the empty tomb in a different light. The message that Jesus' tomb is empty is no longer proclaimed and heard as bad news. Now the disciple whom Jesus loved proclaims the empty tomb as Good News!