

# The Easter Vigil

## TRACKERS

**John 20:1-18**

## The Easter Vigil

**Analysis by Joseph Justus van der Sabb**

20Early 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 towards 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.

11 But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there,

but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.

*Author's Note: "God's Spoor" was not stolen from a commentary, so if that link has been made by others and dismissed without mention, please forgive the re-saying. I admit [it] might be a spurious connection, but I find the "Spoor" helps to break open a detail the Gospel writer obviously thought important to point out, investing all of v. 7 in the effort.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Off Track**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : On the Run**

Of course they ran! If you or I heard that the body of one we love had been stolen by Them, we'd take off running, too, and call the police en route! We'd get there faster than Peter too, sure enough, because we're very good at running. In this day and age, it's important to be in the right place at the right time. To have firsthand information. To know what is what and to be right. Time is money, and it waits for no man, so though haste makes waste, time is, nevertheless, of the essence. We can run a business, run on time (or run behind schedule just as easily, actually... we're talented!) and run to the store. Run into a

friend? Run into trouble? These are not foreign concepts! Yet, what do we seek? Toward what do we run? Is there a plan?

In the 1992 movie based on the 1989 book, The Power of One, a young English boy, P.K., lives at a prison where South African criminals are interred by the Afrikaner regime in a situation of abuse and racism. He and his inmate friend, Geel Piet (played by Morgan Freeman), help to compose a song – the Southland Concerto – which the entire prison then sings at a concert on the occasion of a visiting official of the Afrikaans Government: **“They run here. They run there. They are confused. They are afraid. They are cowards.”** It is beautiful, haunting, taunting, defiant song of freedom. As the inmates sing, Geel Piet is murdered by a guard to whom he has told the meaning of the Zulu lyrics. The hate-filled guard, Bowmann, is not afraid. He is not a coward. He knows what he is doing. He has a plan. He is taking care of this rubbish that dared defy him and his preferred way of being.

They run here... they run there. Peter got from Gethsemane to the inner courtyard of the High Priest in time to see Jesus there. He was moving. After that fiasco, Peter made sure he was long gone when the nails slammed home. Now, on a Sunday morning, Peter and the other one are running again. What is their plan? What are they thinking? “Must... Not... Fall... Must... Beat... Peter...Whoa!... BigStone!... Pothole!” But let’s be serious here...Were they going to huff and puff and blow the grave robbers down? Did they think that by getting there faster they could undo what already had been done? Mary already told them what had happened: “They took the body!” Right... So we better hurry up because the body might not be there?! Let’s find the wheelbarrow tracks and see where they go? Confused and lacking a coherent plan? Yep. Afraid? Seems so. Cowards? Though it seems he’s got his bluster back, thankfully Peter isn’t lashing out with his sword.

And we're so different. We run here. We run there. We are afraid. We are confused. We are cowards. With bluster.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *And Running for Our Lives***

Why? Because we believe that our diligent running about is the foundation upon which the Good Life is built. It's that simple. We believe that our actions and inactions cause (and prevent) our prosperity, our health, our longevity, our happiness. Life is up to us. And time's a wastin', people! Get moving!

Were someone daft enough to actually propose to us that the Good Life can only be the result of trusting the God who "chooses the low, the foolish, the ignoble, the weak and becomes for them righteousness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:18ff), we would either hang them or laugh them out of town, depending on how ardent they appear to be.

"Life isn't up to us?" Of course it is. How dare you suggest otherwise? By the sweat of my brow I eat. By my smarts I move up the ladder. By paying my taxes I stay out of jail. By the earnestness of my prayers I convince God. By my good behavior I become a good person. By believing the right things I remain Confessional. By voting for the right candidate I please God and keep our nation from going to HELL! Need I even mention laziness and tax-dodging and draft-dodging and lying and stealing and killing? Of course not. The righteousness of most these people is as filthy rags... but my righteousness... my precious righteousness is like a fine suit, dry-cleaned by Jesus once a week."

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Toward a Dead End***

It has been said before: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. As Bishop Wells paraphrased Luther for us in this week's Thursday Theology: "**Our god is that which we ultimately trust,**

**the place to which our hearts incline, cling, and entrust themselves.”** And he goes on to cite Luther (p. 386ff, Kolb/Wengert, para 10): **“So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God.”**

We trust in these many things. But not in God. We have many gods. We don't "have" the One True God. Not even now, 2000 years after he raised his Son from the dead. Our hearts are hard. Our hopes are misplaced. We run this way and that way. We look to ourselves and our leaders for our answers. And we think that we are right to do so. We're Lutheran. Of course we shouldn't trust God (or that Muslim, Obama) to get the economy moving again. We're not a theocracy! Trust God? Yeah right! Righteous indignation, that's us. And when worthless, measly sinners get all righteously indignant, that's how God gets too. "You want to run this way and that way? You want to run this show? You want to live in fear?" Fine. Have it your way.

Silence.

... oh crap.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Way**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *The Trail Takes a Turn*

... oh crap.

Silence. And fear and shame and regret and apprehension (John 20:19a).

"Hey guys, Peace be with you" (John 20:19b).

Silence of a whole different sort.

"No, no. Don't run! Fear not! Look, touch, listen, see, taste.

It is me... and I mean it: Peace be with you" (John 20:20a).

Oh. Wow.

Not silence. Not "oh crap" (John 20:20b).

God may leave wretched sinners to their own devices, but that's not Jesus' Way. Showing up as a human being with the intent to die-for me-nailed to a tree, his death as a worthless, measly criminal is the unsettling "Greatest Work of God" revealed to the hate-filled world. Peter and the other guy were on hand to see it and came to know what it meant: That Jesus' identity as Son of God is verified. Jesus is alive AND is a truth-teller! Jesus came as Light into darkness, as a joyful Word into apprehensive silence. As order into chaos. Jesus Messiah IS the friend of sinners: with him, you'll always be alright!

**Yet, you might protest, when Peter and the other guy-who-first-believed got to the tomb, they saw nothing. They didn't meet Jesus! All they saw was a hole in the ground with no dead guy in it! And what's so amazing about that? Oh yeah, and there were those pieces of cloth.**

Consider this: The mighty prophet and man of God, Elijah, has been told by God that it's almost time to move on, "so go anoint Hazael and Jehu to be kings and anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place." So he does and they get to hang out a bit and by and by Elijah hears from God that it's time to go. Elijah wants to travel alone, but Elisha wants to stay by his side, no matter what. By the time they meet and defeat the nay-sayers at Beth-El and Jericho and get to the Jordan, Elisha has been told twice that Elijah is about to be taken from him by Yahweh. Elisha knows that it's true but doesn't want to hear about it. Classic denial. They get to the Jordan, the ancient boundary line of the Promised Land. This thing is a river. So Elijah rolls up his cloak and beats the water with it, and the river opens up a path

through to the eastern bank. They cross over safely enough and Elijah decides to see what Elisha wants for a final request. "Not much, only a double portion of your power." Oh. Is that all. "If you see me taken up, you'll get it. If not, no way." With that, Elijah is swept into heaven in a whirlwind; by horses and chariots of fire! Elisha sees it happening and cries out "My Father, My Father! The horses and chariots of Israel!" Once everything settled down and his wits have returned a bit, Elisha looks around and sees the old cloak lying there. So he picks it up and heads back to the Jordan. Upon arrival, he takes the rolled-up cloak and beats the water with it. Nothing happens. So he cries out, "Where is Yahweh, the God of Elijah!?" and beats the water again and opens a pathway through the waters through which he returns to the others and a life of service (loose but important paraphrases from 1 Kings 19 through 2 Kings 2).

Peter and the other guy have been around a pile of recently-used-and-no-longer-needed graveclothes before. Just a few weeks prior to this Sunday morning, they were watching in dumb horror and amazement as they unwrapped Lazarus "the Un-Dead" of Bethany. So they know what graveclothes in a heap look like. And next to these graveclothes is a piece of cloth that has been rolled up. By whom? Why? It is for crossing the Jordan. For getting into and out of the Promised Land. For a Sign that Death and Failure are not the ones who've been here most recently...? No sir. This rolled up cloth is the Sign that Yahweh the God of Elijah has been here. Grave-robber tracks? No way. This is God's spoor. And that changes everything.

Peter and the other guy come to the tomb without a plan. They might have thought they were coming to track down grave robbers, to find the trail, to be sure they don't lose the scent. But the tracks they find are plain as day, at least to the disciple Jesus loved... and there won't be any use in looking for this body, not in the next three days, not ever. There is no body-as

with Moses and Elijah and Enoch-there are only the remnants of their passing. A staff. A rolled up piece of cloth. A commission and double portion of authority. This is not the doing of grave robbers; this is NOT the doing of Death and his sidekick, Failure. The missing body is gone, via God, and is safe in whatever realm Elijah's body is in. That's enough of a Sign for the beloved disciple. He sees that much, the tip of what he can tell is an iceberg, and he believes. The Cross, unsightly as it was, was the whirlwind, the chariot of fire. It was God's withdrawal of his Servant from this world until another time. And he, the beloved disciple, was on hand at the foot of the cross to see it happen! For that disciple standing here, stupefied, here is a mantle to take up. A double portion of power, the portion due a firstborn son. And with it, a leadership role among God's people.

The Gospel of John is known for the Signs which it offers "in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Are not these linens in the empty tomb the final Sign given before the Risen Jesus himself appears to Mary in the Garden? ...Just saying... More than being the final Sign before the First Resurrection Appearance, it is a Sign powerful enough that it triggers belief-trust-in the beloved disciple. It could even be said that this is the opening fanfare of a pretty amazing fireworks display. First comes the Sign of the Empty Tomb and its linen clothes, the crumpled ones and the rolled up one. Then are angels, then a "Gardener" who restores a wounded and broken Mary to Life by just knowing her name. Then, in a locked room, Jesus enters and dispels their fear. But is Jesus a vision or a ghost or a group hallucination? Time to light up another round of fireworks for our Doubting Twin, Thomas, and leave him/us jaw-dropped, gasping for air: "My Lord and my God!" With that crescendo, the fireworks don't need to carry on any more... and yet they do. On a lakeshore, at breakfast time. There, now



everyone seems to have been more than taken care of. God's little display has been abundantly adequate.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Crossing the River***

Except the fireworks keep going. "Signs" that lead to trust in God keep happening. Fifty days later at 9 in the morning. On the road to Damascus. In a prison in Philippi. In a classroom in Wittenberg. At table in homes. In a church in Podunk, Iowa. They believe. They stop running. "I was blind but now I see." They pass on the telltale signs to the next generation, that they too might one day see what they're looking at. "Blessed are those who have not seen it all firsthand, who were not able to run down the garden path in a panic or leap overboard into Gennesaret at dawn and see it for themselves...and who yet believe." These Signs are here, through time and space, made new, pointed to, so that you can trust the Good News: Jesus Christ is alive in God and means you well. You can trust him. He's got you no matter what.

Trusting that Promise, we do "have" the One True God. Our faith is patently not in our "wisdom, power, family prestige, honor."

But do we trust that all this means good things for us? Yeah. We do. Like Adam and Abraham, Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and John son of Zechariah, Peter James and John, Paul and Mark and Timothy, we know that Life is NOT up to us. Life is up to God. So yeah. We do trust that God. This is God who in Christ did the unthinkable and became human to suffer and die on my behalf. This is God who declares He Who Had No Sin to become sin for me. This is God who declares measly sinners righteous because of Jesus. This is God who has left his spoor. Yeah. We trust that God.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *A Whole New World***

And trusting that God, we are made into mantle bearers. Signboards. People with direction. No longer do we run amok or run about mindlessly. We take time. We take the authority granted at the empty tomb and we open the watery portals of the Promised Land. We watch as hotheads and sinners, doubters and betrayers, are washed into our midst, washed clean, and we watch as God forms them into our colleagues and leaders, our brothers and sisters. We remember our Lord who showed his real body to Thomas in order that Thomas might trust him, and we do more than just remember. We take and eat. We forgive one another in the stead, and by the command, of Christ. We are unified as one body, with one Lord, in one baptism. We join together in prayer and song. We celebrate our Lord's death, his resurrection, until he comes. We "go therefore," we teach, we make disciples of all nations. We feed lambs and sheep. Is there anything we don't do? Well no, not really. Oh yeah, we don't "run" quite as much. We don't need the honor and the prestige and the success and the security, the money, not the way that we used to. And we are not silent. We sing. We sing our Southland Concertos to defy the oppressor. We sing to honor God. We sing of those chariots and horsemen of fire.... "My Father, My Father!"