

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 21, 2019

[John 20:1-18](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](#).)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on John 20:1-18

(From *Homiletics*; “Jesus on Ice”, April 20, 2003)

The account of Easter presented by John has only the fundamentals in common with the synoptic tradition. In fact, there is so much variation among the four gospel accounts that the basic story line shared by all includes only these details: Early on the first day of the week, at least one woman discovered that the tomb, in which Jesus was placed after the crucifixion, was empty. Trying to blend the details of all the accounts into one account is a hopeless muddle. Certainly the variety of the details suggests a mixing of traditions about the event, if not competing stories from competing sects of the church.

In John’s account, Mary Magdalene, grief-stricken, visits the tomb of Jesus. Unlike Mark’s and Luke’s reports, Mary, according to John, is alone. Furthermore, she does not bring spices to anoint the body. According to the Fourth Gospel, Nicodemus has already fulfilled this ceremonial custom (19:40).

Finding that the stone is rolled away, Mary does not investigate the empty tomb. Rather, she runs to Simon Peter and “the other disciple,” assuming that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. The identification of “the other disciple” is a critical detail unique to John that most likely points to a particular concern of the Johannine community. It has been suggested again and again to the point of general consensus that the author of the Fourth Gospel wanted to downplay the authority of Peter and to raise the authority of the mysterious “other disciple” in the early church.

Raymond Brown is the most noted scholar to suggest that the Fourth Gospel is the work of a sectarian church on the fringe of early Christianity in competition with the Petrine church which was better established (see R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, [New York: Paulist Press], 1979). This mysterious character has been identified as the disciple known to the high priest who let Peter into the courtyard (18:15-16), who may be the same disciple “whom Jesus loved ... who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper” (21:20). Many have assumed that the “other disciple” is the circumlocution for the author John himself.

In any event, there seems to be little reason to highlight the fact that “the other disciple” out-races Peter and reaches the tomb first (v. 4), and then noting that he “saw and believed” when there is no such remark made about Peter, other than to emphasize the unnamed disciple’s importance. However, contrary to most commentators’ opinions, the “other disciple’s” belief may point only to his comprehension that Jesus’ body is really gone, not that something supernatural has occurred. The fact that the two disciples merely “returned to their homes” indicates that they did not understand the full significance of what was happening.

Mary, the faithful griever, re-enters the narrative and receives the full epiphany. As she stoops to look in, she sees two angels in white. On the number of mysterious visitors, John and Luke agree. That it is an angelic visitation is a detail shared by John and Matthew. In John’s account, one angel sits at the head and one at the feet. This detail is more likely a simple elaboration of a source rather than an independent tradition.

Mary does not seem to question the identity of these two heavenly visitors. Her question is very down-to-earth: “Where have you taken my Lord?” What is of interest is that she recognizes the angels in white and confuses the risen Lord with a gardener. Considering how much emphasis John places on Jesus’ glorification in his gospel, this earthy description of Jesus seems a bit peculiar. And yet there is a purpose to Mary’s inability to recognize Jesus for who he is. She does not recognize Jesus until he calls her by name. No doubt the reader should remember Jesus’ teaching about the “good shepherd” who calls his sheep by name and they recognize him (10:14). Here there is not a glorious, magnificent revelation; only a word, a name.

This part of the text is full of oddities which may surprise the reader. It is a bit surprising that Mary’s response to Jesus is to call him by the title “Rabbouni,” which John then needs to translate to his non-Hebrew audience. One might expect a more powerful, theologically rich title. Again, however, John’s process is subtly progressive. Jesus will reveal himself more and more fully in stages. It should not be forgotten that later on in the chapter Jesus commends those who believe without seeing and touching (v. 29). Hence, the gospel writer downplays the experience of personal contact and comprehension even at the tomb; the advantage of seeing the risen Lord is slight.

Many emphasize the oddity of the reluctance of Jesus to be touched. This reluctance is overdone. The NRSV is correct in interpreting that Jesus’ reticence is not about being touched but about being held on to. John’s theological intent is revealed: No one can hold down, or cling to, the resurrected one. While it is not stated, the message is implied: Jesus is even more unfathomable now than he was when alive — one is not able to grasp him. Jesus will reveal himself to those whom he wishes. The revelation of the resurrected one will necessitate a different kind of relationship, not based upon physical contact but upon a spiritual unity that will make the believer one with the risen Lord.

Others have noted the peculiarity of Jesus’ reference to his ascension. This has befuddled many a commentator. It may be that between this appearance to Mary and Jesus’ appearance to the disciples and especially Thomas (vv. 26-29), Jesus experiences a more complete glorification (C.K. Barrett). In any case, Jesus’ resurrection is part of an ongoing process of glorification. Whatever the actuality of the event, what is stressed is that Jesus is fulfilling what he has promised during his life — that he and those who believe in him will become one with him and the Father (17:21-23).

The passage ends on a slightly odd note as well. Jesus sends Mary back to the disciples (Gk. “brothers”) to announce that Jesus is ascending to God. In this, there is a similarity to Matthew’s gospel which also combines the resurrection with the ascension. However, in John’s gospel, the disciples remain sequestered away and must wait to meet the risen Lord a week later.

However, despite the difference between John’s and the other gospels and the underlying details, which appear to be shaped by John, there is the awesome good news that Jesus is alive and that those who believe in him are forever changed.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on John 20:1-18

1. The commentary above highlights the many differences between the various gospels accounts of the Easter story. Take some time to look at the story in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20-21? How does the diversity of details enhance your appreciation and understanding of the resurrection story? How do they detract from it? How do you make sense of these sometimes contradicting accounts?
2. What is the real nature of Jesus' resurrection according to John's account? Why can Mary not recognize Jesus by sight (v. 14-15) Why can she not "hold on" to him? (v 17) And what does the ascension status of Jesus have anything to do with Mary embracing him? What conclusions are we to draw from such details about Jesus' post-resurrection body?
3. Jesus' commission to Mary to tell the "brothers" what she has seen and heard (v. 17) has earned her the title of "apostle to the apostles." What is the significance of her being the bearer of the good news of Jesus' resurrection?
4. Can we even imagine such an Easter scene today? If so, what would it look like in our time? Use your imagination here!

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?