

John 20:1-18: **What If?**

Easter Sunday, Highland Presbyterian Church, 5 April 2026

C. Nolan Huizenga

Jesus has been in the tomb, dead, since Friday evening. On Saturday his followers mark the Sabbath in quiet fear and grief. Then comes Sunday morning. Listen with me for God's word to us from the gospel of John, chapter 20 (CEB):

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

Mary. There are several Marys in the gospel stories. In this story it's Mary Magdalene. Scripture tells us that Jesus had liberated her from seven evil spirits. Grateful for her newfound health and freedom, Mary chose to follow Jesus as he taught and traveled, and she became his friend.

So imagine Mary's grief and horror on Friday. She and Jesus' mother Mary and another Mary stood there and bore witness as Jesus was crucified. They were brave to attend his execution. By then most of Jesus' disciples had gone into hiding, fearing the authorities would come for them next. But these strong women faced the awfulness directly. Maybe they held each other as they watched Jesus in agony, hearing his cries from the cross. They may have lingered enough to see Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus' body and gently prepare it for burial. For Mary Magdalene, and for everyone else who loved Jesus, Friday was disastrous.

Now it's Sunday. Very early. Mary gets up and walks by herself to visit Jesus' tomb. Maybe she can't sleep. Maybe she wants time to grieve alone. Maybe she intends to say a quiet goodbye to the one who set her free.

Mary arrives at the tomb and...it's open. This is not okay.

I'll tell you about one more Mary, my own beloved Aunt Mary. *That* Mary was the kind of person who put everyone she met at ease. When I was my most annoying self, probably about age 13, Mary made me feel like she really liked me anyway. Aunt Mary also loved to give gifts, and she seemed equally happy offering you an English muffin or giving away her car to someone in need. Everyone loved her.

Then Mary died in a car crash. Thirty-some years later I still miss her. I've repeatedly gone to see her grave. I stand in the cemetery and I remember her life. I say out loud how much I miss her. I pray. Never have I visited Aunt Mary's burial site and found the stone pushed away, found an empty hole in the ground. That just doesn't happen. If I ever *did* find my aunt's grave disturbed and empty, I'd be upset! Confused! Angry! Finding a grave destroyed adds insult to injury. If I saw that I'd feel desperate to find someone to help me right this wrong.

That's Mary Magdalene in our gospel text. She sees that Jesus' tomb has been opened for some reason, and she is distraught.

What if grave robbers have been here?

What if Pilate took Jesus' body so no one could make a shrine of his tomb?

What if Joseph of Arimathea decided that after all he doesn't want a convicted criminal buried in his family tomb?

What if someone is playing a terrible joke on Jesus' followers?

What if Mary can't say her goodbyes because she can't even find Jesus' dead body?

Mary runs off to tell Peter and another disciple, "They have taken the Lord's body from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

They all come racing back to find that Jesus' body indeed is gone. That means someone took it, right?

Dead bodies do not simply "disappear." Someone has to remove them. In [our] world of cause and effect...Mary's logic is right on target. Find Jesus' body, wherever it has been taken, and get on with grieving.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, eds. *Texts for Preaching, Year B: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993. p. 275.

Then something even weirder happens. Through her tears Mary looks into the empty tomb and sees *two angels!* But even this incredible vision can't distract Mary from her desperation to find Jesus' body. The angels ask why she's crying and she says again, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." She doesn't know who "they" might be, but she knows *somebody* is responsible for Jesus being missing.

Mary spins around and sees a man standing there, who says, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he's the gardener, she replies, "Sir, if *you* have carried his body away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

All this time Mary has been looking for Jesus' *body*. In her world — in our world — dead people stay dead. Power and money push their weight around. Bureaucratic systems can be deathly when we're trapped in them. Injustice so often prevails, overpowering mercy and hope. These patterns are what you and I have come to expect, and they are what Mary expected. They are the reality we have accepted.

Each of us here has experience with loss and grief, with disappointment and frustration. Or we will have before long. At his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the great blues musician Buddy Guy said, "If you don't think you've got the blues, just keep living." I think part of what he means is that sooner or later, death will come for everyone we love, and for us too.

But on this early Sunday morning when Mary goes in grief to the tomb, something entirely new happens when she meets "the gardener." Jesus says to her, "Mary."

One word, her name, changes Mary's entire reality. How in the world could Jesus, whom she saw die, be standing in front of her, alive, whole, and speaking her name?<sup>2</sup>

Presbyterian pastor Landon Whitsitt wrote this week about the apostle Paul, early church evangelist and epistle writer, who describes Jesus resurrected as a "spiritual body," a body ... "animated by God's Spirit" — a body that runs on a different power source. Not less than a body. But a body that belongs to God's future rather than to the decaying present.

The contrast Paul draws isn't between physical and non-physical. It's between two modes of embodied existence: one perishable, mortal, suited to the present age. The other imperishable, immortal, suited to the age to come.<sup>2</sup>

Landon continues the scripture study by saying,

Jesus isn't an exception proving God can do impossible things when God feels like it. He's the first installment of what God is doing for everyone. The resurrection has started. The future has broken into the present. New creation has begun — and we're living in the middle of it....

The powers that run the world — death, empire, fear — have been exposed as already defeated, even though they're still operating. We're living in the overlap of the ages, after Christ's resurrection but before the full harvest, in the time between the already and the not yet.... [Paul] proclaimed that the future had invaded the present and nothing would ever be the same.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Whitsitt, Landon. "Zombie Jesus: What Paul Actually Claimed About Resurrection." Substack post, 31 March 2026. <https://landonwhitsitt.substack.com/p/zombie-jesus>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Standing tearfully in the garden, *Mary* has not yet had time to rebuild all her theology. But her mind blown by this impossible experience, *Mary* recognizes that *it's really Jesus*. She spontaneously calls him "Teacher," like she always had. Jesus speaks again, saying that he has to go home to see his father. He tells *Mary*, meanwhile, to go report what she's seen to the others who love him. So once more *Mary* races off, this time carrying incredibly good news. She's the first person to announce to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" *Mary* is the original gospel preacher.

Then all those scared, floundering disciples will have to ask themselves: What if the impossible can happen? What if Pilate doesn't get to deliver the final verdict about Jesus? What if God's love overturns death, powerlessness, injustice, and *all* deathly powers?

*Mary's* witness to the resurrected Jesus confronts us with the same questions. What if this outrageous good news about Jesus is true? How will it change our lives?

As *Mary* and all the great preachers challenge us,  
 Will [we] live as if death has been defeated?  
 Will [we] practice resurrection?  
 Will [we] choose forgiveness when vengeance would be easier?  
 Will [we] hope when despair makes more sense?  
 Will [we] orient [our lives] around the claim that God's future is more real than empire's present — that love is more durable than violence, that life is more fundamental than death, that new creation is happening right now even when you can't see it?<sup>4</sup>

Right now four of our fellow humans — multiple colors, multiple genders, multiple nationalities — are in a spacecraft named *Integrity* approaching the moon. Thousands and thousands of people all over the globe worked creatively, passionately, collaboratively to make this mission possible. It's the first time anyone has left Earth orbit since I was five years old. Yesterday astronaut Jeremy Hansen said to all of us back on Earth, "If we can send [humans] around the moon in 2026, just imagine what we are capable of doing next."

He reminded me of a similar line from the film *Conclave*, about the struggle to elect a new pope. As the college of cardinals gathers, they reveal their humanness, their diverse convictions, their loyalties, their faith and their fears. When one cardinal lashes out vehemently against change and progress, another cardinal who has served all his life among the most vulnerable says, "The church is not tradition. The church is not the past. The church is what we do next."

Friends, God's deathless future has broken into our decaying present. Resurrected Jesus speaks each of our names and sends us forth with incredibly good news. Rooted in that new Easter reality, what will we Christ's church do next?

In the name of God working resurrection,  
 Jesus Christ alive forever,  
 and the Holy Spirit bringing new life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.