

# On your Marks... Get Set...

Hespeler, April 9, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Easter

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3:1-4, [John 20:1-18](#)

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a beautiful, crisp and clear Sunday morning. The sun is just a little up over the horizon on this early spring day. The birds are singing. A gentle breeze is blowing. And a lively crowd of hundreds has turned out for the final leg of this first ever Sunday after the Passover footrace.

And, yes, it seems as if the patience of all of these spectators has finally paid off as I think... yes, I can see the two lead runners coming around the bend. My friends, this is so exciting, they seem to be running neck and neck. On the inside track is a figure that I know will be familiar to many running fans. He is big, he is brash, he is built as solid as a rock. With broad shoulders and the calloused hands of a man who has spent many years hauling in fishing nets on the Sea of Galilee, that can only be Simon who is known to his friends and fans alike as The Rock.

But alongside him, matching him pace for pace is... that other guy. You know, he is that disciple that Jesus was really very fond of, but I never seem to remember his name. The commentator in my ear is telling me that his name is John, but I am not sure whether or not that is right.

## The Final Leg

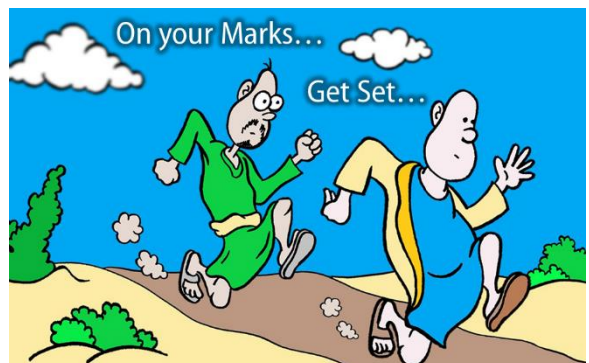
Anyways, this race just got pretty exciting as it looks as if the other guy, you know the one who isn't The Rock, just took the lead on the straightaway. Yes, as we come into the final stretch, he is a good length ahead of his nearest competitor. I can see the sweat on The Rock's brow from here as he struggles to catch up, but he just doesn't seem to have it left in him to make up that gap.

And now, as we come up to the finish line it is the other guy and The Rock – the other guy and the Rock. It looks like it's going to be a photo finish, a photo finish. But now... what is happening? It seems as if the other guy is stopping short. He's pulling up just before the finish line. I repeat, the other guy is not entering into the tomb. He's pulling up and just looking in and, yes, Simon the Rock is rushing straight past him and going into the tomb! Ladies and gentlemen, this is so exciting! It appears that we have a winner!

The Rock has entered the tomb and he is examining the linen cloths lying there. And now the other guy has entered as well. He appears to have come in second in this race, but it looks like, yes, it appears that he believes! Of course, it's not entirely clear at the moment what it is that he believes because neither of them seem to have understood the purpose behind what has happened here today because they do not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

## A Strange Intrusion

I'm sure that I am not the only one who is a little bit puzzled by this strange intrusion into the



story of Easter morning in the Gospel of John. I certainly understand why the story of Mary Magdalene discovering the empty tomb, her conversation with two angels inside and then ultimately her meeting with the risen Jesus outside the tomb is really important.

But I cannot help but wonder why, in the midst of all of that, we have to take a break to hear the story of a footrace between Simon Peter and this other disciple. Why does that matter? It's not as if they really discover anything of much importance. They simply confirm what Mary has already reported, that the tomb is empty.

They examine what evidence there is inside, but it certainly doesn't amount to more than a few folded grave clothes. Sure, that might be interesting to a crime scene investigator, but it's hardly conclusive proof of anything. So why is this reported? Why does it even matter?

## Ignoring Women's Discoveries

It does sort of feel like an example of the kind of thing that often happens when women make discoveries of significance or importance.

When Elizabeth Magie, a creative genius, invented a game that powerfully illustrated some of the excesses of capitalism and monopolistic practices, she called it The Landlord's Game. But you've probably never heard of that game, have you, even though it became one of the most popular board games of all times? That is because two men, George and Charles, better known as The Parker Brothers, took her idea and renamed it Monopoly.

Or think about the scientists who have taught us about the nature of the universe. Everybody knows who it was that discovered gravity because his name was Sir Isaac Newton. Everyone knows who discovered the special theory of relativity. His name was Albert Einstein. So how is it that nobody seems to know who it was who discovered what stars are made of – that they are mostly made of hydrogen? That was a phenomenally important discovery and yet no one seems to know that scientist's name. It might have something to do with the fact that *her* name was Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin.

Women have often discovered extraordinary things and made enormous accomplishments and yet, when it comes to writing down the stories of these discoveries, how often do we tend to focus only on the things that men did?

## A Bit of Male Chauvinism

And so, yes, in the midst of the Gospel of John's resurrection story, which should be focused only on Mary Magdalene making the most important discovery of all time, it is somehow not very surprising that we are forced to pause and listen to a story about a couple of men who apparently got into a competition to see who could run to the tomb first. It seems like a bit of a moment when the men of the world are saying, hey, I know these women did amazing things on Easter Sunday but, look at us over here! We found this folded cloth! Hurray for us!

So yes, it seems to me that there is a bit of male chauvinism going on in this account. But I do not think that this is just about a couple of men trying to steal the limelight. This little footrace is actually all about a rather dangerous trend that has been part of Christianity right from the very beginning.

## The Power of an Event

The Christian faith sprang into existence as a result of the extraordinary event that we celebrate here today. The resurrection of Jesus is an event of such power that it calls into question every other principality and power in this world. It destroys the power of sin and guilt which keeps so many enslaved by the power of shame and condemnation. It destroys the power of death and the fear of death that looms over everything that we do in this world. Above all, it offers to people freedom – freedom from guilt, from fear and from death.

But whenever you are dealing with something as powerful as that, we human beings have an immediate reaction. We want to control it. We want to make sure that this thing that could disrupt absolutely everything doesn't do that. We immediately want to make sure that somebody is in charge. It is ironic of course, it is really an attempt to rob the resurrection of its true transformative power, but it is what we do.

## A Power Struggle

And so, in the aftermath of their experience of the resurrection, the church was immediately plunged into a power struggle. There were people and factions who wanted to become the controllers and the conduits of this incredible power.

And that is also what this footrace between Simon Peter and the other disciple represents. Because clearly, these two figures represent two factions of the church that were in contention with each other. We know, of course, that Simon Peter was an acknowledged leader for many in the early Christian Church. The other disciple in this race, whose identity is very carefully kept obscured, clearly represents the leadership of the church for which this gospel was written.

Surely this is reflective of real-life conflict between those Christians who followed the leadership of Peter and those who saw themselves as part of the Church of the Beloved Disciple.

## Mary Magdalene's Leadership

In addition, we know that Mary Magdalene was acknowledged, at least by some Christians, as an important leader and as one who could speak for the risen Jesus. In many ways this race is all about the early attempts of various men to replace her in her role as a leader because some could not tolerate the very idea female leadership.

So I suspect that the author of this Gospel, by inserting this strange story of two men racing to the tomb to look at some folded linen, might have been trying to say something about the absurdity of what we have sometimes tried to do with the incredible good news of the resurrection of Jesus. We have tried to get it under human control. It just seems safer if we don't let it shake things up too much.

## “Do Not Touch Me”

There is an episode towards the end of this story that illustrates just how dangerous this impulse is. When Mary Magdalene is finally confronted with the risen Jesus, when she finally manages to recognize him through all of her tears, her first reaction is completely understandable. She reaches out to take hold of him. And let's recognize this gesture for what it is. She wants to

hold onto the power of the resurrection for her church. She wants to be the conduit through which others can experience this incredible power.

But what does Jesus say to her? **“Do not touch 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.’”** The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power of God. It will never fall under the control of Mary nor of the disciples nor of any church. If ever we try and restrict it and tell God whom God may raise and when and how and why, we will show ourselves to be fools. It is the power of God. We cannot hold on to it.

## Transforming Power

So Mary cannot hold onto Jesus. What we need to do is allow the power of Jesus and of his resurrection to take hold of us. To transform us both as individuals and as a church. That is when we will experience the true power that raised Jesus from the dead.

You cannot control it. You have to let it control you. And that can be frightening because it destroys the power in this world that keeps people in line, that makes people feel guilty or shameful for who they are and who God made them to be. The power of the resurrection is meant to set us free from all such domination so that we may set others free – so that we may proclaim to all that they are loved and accepted just as they are because that is what the power of God does.

My friends, let us not get into footraces with people who perhaps approach faith and belief a little bit differently from us because we have to be right and so therefore they have to be wrong. That is a waste of our energy. Let us allow the power of Jesus’ resurrection to overtake us and set us free to love, to serve and to release the people of this earth from the domination that is preventing them from being who they truly are in the eyes of God. I believe that that is the power that Mary Magdalene learned by the end of that day. Some two millennia later, isn’t it about time that we learned it too?