

# Stumbling Towards the Tomb in the Dark

Hespeler, April 05, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Easter Day

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18

**T**he Gospel of John tells a slightly different story of Easter morning from the other ones. The other Gospels tell us about several women coming out to the tomb as the third day after the crucifixion dawns. They may be sad and confused, but at least they are together and they walk in the early morning light.

But John starts the story like this: **“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.”** John invites us to imagine Mary all alone and stumbling in the dark at one of the hardest moments in her life.

When John tells us this, I do not think that he is trying to contradict or correct the accounts in the other Gospels. He may be aware that there were other women who were there.

## Symbolic

This adjustment to the story is more symbolic than literal. Throughout this Gospel, the image of people walking alone in the darkness comes up a few times. It always means that someone is lost, confused and doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. That is what John is telling us about Mary at this point in the story. He is also warning us that we might have the same problem this Easter morning.

And Mary's failure to understand what Jesus is about is put directly on display. She arrives at the tomb and sees one thing and immediately jumps to the wrong conclusion. She sees that the protective stone has been removed from the tomb, and she doesn't even bother to investigate. She doesn't even look inside (perhaps because it is still so dark), and just jumps to a conclusion: **“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”**

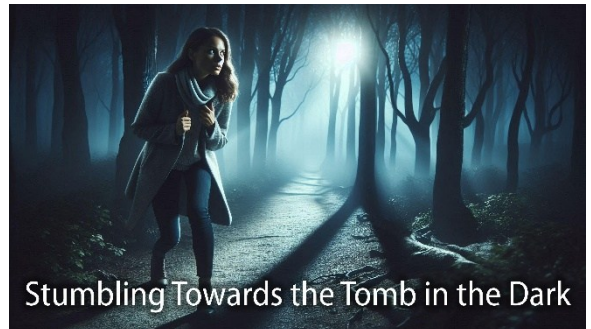
## The Story Mary Tells

We know what that missing stone means, don't we? It means that Jesus is no longer dead. It means that he is risen and that death has no dominion over him and that because he lives, we may live also.

But what story does Mary tell herself? She tells a story of theft, **“They have taken the Lord.”** She tells a story of doubt, **“We don't know.”** Most of all, she tells a story of a mysterious “them,” a seemingly all-powerful enemy who is intent on destroying whatever hope or comfort she might find in this deeply troubling world.

The story that Mary tells is a false narrative, but maybe we could forgive her for it. She has stumbled upon a confusing situation in the dark. Who wouldn't jump to the worst conclusion? But, once established, her belief proves remarkably resilient.

After she tells her false story to the male disciples, she returns to the tomb with Peter and another disciple. It is now full morning and, in the light of day, the disciples turn up more evidence for



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what has happened. They turn up linen wrappings that had been on Jesus' body, and the cloth that had been on his head rolled up separately.

## Evidence of the Grave Clothes

This new evidence goes against Mary's story. What kind of evil grave robber "them" is going to take the trouble to carefully unwrap and fold the linens? This new evidence apparently convinces one of the disciples to believe something different, though we're not told what.

But Mary, what does she do with this new information? Is she willing to revise her story? Not for one minute! She has a narrative, and she is going to stick with it.

The two men leave to mull things over, but she remains firmly committed to her story. She remains alone and weeping at the cave, still firmly believing that the insidious "they" have done something cruel.

## Heavenly Visitors

The next test of her commitment to her tale comes in the form of a heavenly apparition. She looks into the tomb to see two angels sitting there. Note that John doesn't say men dressed in white like some of the other Gospels. He doesn't say that they looked kind of like angels. It was apparently obvious that they were angels.

This is the clearest indication yet that Mary's story is wrong. Why would angels show up at the scene of a random grave robbery? But is Mary at all willing to revise her interpretation of the events? Not for a moment. Indeed, she repeats the exact same story to the angels: **"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."**

## Why, Nothing Less than the Appearance of Jesus Himself!

By this point, it is clear that Mary is so committed to her story that nothing will shake her from it. I mean, sure, if the risen Jesus himself were to come and stand right in front of her then she would have to admit that her story is wrong, but anything short of...

Wait, what? Are you telling me that that is exactly what happened next, and she still wouldn't let go of her narrative? She was so lost in her story that she didn't even recognize the man that she had followed for years. She assumed he was a landscaper and actually accused him of working with "them" in their horrible crime? This I've got to see.

Well, what do you know! I guess Mary Magdalene was really that committed to her story.

## A Warning About False Narratives

What is John trying to say by telling us the story in this way? As I have already said, I do not think that this is coming out of a concern to relate exactly what happened as it happened. No, he points us to a deeper meaning here. He is warning you, me and all of us that we too are stuck in false narratives.

We come here on this day to celebrate the resurrection. We claim to believe that, on that Easter many years ago, the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. But sometimes we, like Mary, get stuck in our narratives about what these things mean.

Our narratives are not necessarily false. We tell ourselves that this event proves to us who Jesus is – that he is the one who has revealed God to us. And we tell ourselves that, because he rose from the dead, we too may hope to live again after we die. Those are good and comforting truths.

## Stories About “Them”

But are we still stumbling around in the dark, failing to appreciate all that it means that the stone has been removed from the tomb? For example, one of the false narratives that Mary embraces in the dark is that some mysterious “them” is still in charge of the story. “They” are stealing and creating doubt.

Who, I wonder, are our mysterious “them”? Who are the ones that we think are taking the incredible victory of Easter and turning it into theft and doubt?

## Using the Power of the Resurrection for Control

Some of “them” may be Christians, or at least claim to be. “They” are those kinds of Christians who steal the power of Jesus’ resurrection and use it to control others. “They” say that unless you live out the Christian life exactly as they tell you to and believe what they say you must believe, you cannot be saved.

That is a false narrative. The victory that Jesus won over the grave is a victory won for all. He did not release you from the chains of death only in order to imprison you to someone who claims to speak in his name. The victory that Jesus offers, you can receive on your own terms by simply trusting in him and what he has done.

## Those Who Use the Message to Victimize

Or perhaps “they” are those who steal the message of Jesus and use it for things contrary to what Jesus stood for. “They” may hate or exclude the stranger in the name of Jesus. “They” may victimize the poor, the minority or the marginalized and claim that it is only what Jesus tells them to do.

Did Jesus bust out of the tomb so that such things could be done in his name? Of course not! But how many Christians are caught up in thinking that this is what the Christian faith is all about?

## Breaking Out of False Narratives

And what will it take to break some people out of such false narratives? You can show them the evidence, the folded grave clothes. You can give them Jesus’ clear teachings about loving your neighbours even when they are hated Samaritans. You can repeat the Beatitudes until you are blue in the face, and they will only accuse you of being too woke.

Why, even if you sent angelic visitors to tell them what the message of the resurrection is, they would still be stuck.

And if Jesus himself were to appear to them in the form of a migrant landscape worker, or someone living rough, or suffering from a mental health crisis, would that convince them? You would hope so, but it doesn’t seem to be happening.

## Jesus Appears

Jesus appears in this world all the time. We see that in the famous Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in the Gospel of Matthew. There, Jesus speaks to both groups and tells them that they have seen him. **“I was hungry and you gave me food,”** he says to the sheep, **“I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”**

So Jesus does appear to people who hold onto this false narrative all the time. But when he appears, for example, in the form of a migrant farm worker, hard working, but possibly inadequately documented, do they see the risen Christ? No, they only see a gardener and probably a gardener who is dangerous and scary, a gardener no doubt working for the dreaded “they” who are trying to destroy our way of life.

## Don't Be Like Mary

Do not be too hard on Mary. She may have come to the risen Jesus in the dark and, as a result, she embraced a false story of what had happened. And it was a story that she had a hard time letting go of.

We do the same thing. We fail to embrace the full meaning of the resurrection too. We, too, become attached to the false stories that we create. And they are stories of powerlessness, victimization and fear.

## Jesus Changes Her Narrative with One Word

But I have good news on this Easter Sunday. Mary is just like us. She came to the resurrection in the dark like us. She clung to her false stories about what had happened, just like we do. But she did not leave that tomb in the dark. And when she left, she left her falsehoods behind.

How did that happen? What made the difference? Only one thing, but it was everything. Jesus said one word to her; he called her name. And suddenly the darkness lifted, and all the truth about what Jesus had accomplished for her came crashing in on her. She knew she had seen the Lord and joyfully shared that good news with the others.

I know that you may be struggling in the darkness today. I know that, as you look around at the disturbing events surrounding us, you have been telling yourselves stories about a dangerous and all-powerful “them.” You have stories of fear, anxiety and powerlessness that haunt the corners of your mind.

## Jesus is Calling

But the risen Jesus is calling out to you today. And he is calling you by your name because he has known you from before the foundations of the earth. The only question is, will you hear him calling? Will you drop all of the falseness you've been clinging to and cry out “**Rabbouni**” with Mary? Will you let his death and his resurrection teach you better?

The stone has been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb for you. Embrace the whole truth of what that means for you today.