

THE BELOVED DISCIPLE



The Fourth Gospel 20:1 "Early 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. So 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and (ran) toward the tomb . . . Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

This is the fourth of a seven-part sermon series that I am preaching all this Easter Season entitled "The Witnesses to the Resurrection," a rare chance to review all of these biblical accounts in a single year. So we have looked at the story of the women at the sepulcher on Easter morning, then the story of the

Doubting Thomas, and last week, we looked at the well-known story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Today I want to focus on the less well-known and enigmatic story of the Beloved disciple and his encounter with the empty tomb.

To us the meaning of the Empty Tomb is obvious and self-evident. Indeed the Empty Tomb has become for most Christians a symbol of the Resurrection. In the English Prayer book of 1662, the Gospel lesson appointed to be read on Easter Sunday morning never went beyond the discovery of the empty tomb by the women. For Christians, that was enough. The point was made. We all know the tomb is empty because we know that Jesus rose from the grave.

But the Empty Tomb did not carry that meaning for those first witnesses. Only the Beloved Disciple, we are told, "saw (the empty tomb) and believed." To all of the others, the Empty Tomb meant that the grave had been robbed and the body of their Lord had been removed and desecrated. The women who visited the grave that first Easter morning were at the sight of the Empty Tomb overcome with grief, not joy. They became frightened. They broke down crying. Mary Magdalene tried to explain their weeping to the angels by saying, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Moments later she pleaded with the person whom she supposed was the gardener, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." The presence of the Empty Tomb was a horror to the disciples. Peter and the Beloved Disciple in this

morning's Gospel ran to confirm the tragic news the moment Mary Magdalene brought word of its discovery. And according to Luke's Gospel, "Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." (Lk. 24:12) Only the Beloved Disciple, we are told, "saw (the empty tomb) and believed," although we are not exactly told what he believed.

The meaning of the Empty Tomb had to be explained to the other disciples by the message of angels. It was the angels who tried to comfort the women's tears and explain to them that Jesus was raised from the grave and would soon appear to them. "Do not be amazed," the angelic messengers said, " . . . Why do you seek the living among the dead . . . Do not be afraid; for we know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come; see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." And yet after this, according to Mark's Gospel, "(the women) went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were (still) afraid" (Mk. 16:8). The Empty Tomb and even the message of the angels was not enough to convince those first witnesses of the reality of the Resurrection. Like Thomas, they were all doubters at first. It was not until the Risen Lord actually appeared to the disciples, that any of them really

understood the meaning of the Empty Tomb and believed the message of the angels that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. Only the Beloved Disciple, we are told, "saw (the empty tomb) and believed."

So who then was this Beloved Disciple who alone understood the meaning of the Empty Tomb? Well, the Beloved Disciple is mentioned only in the closing chapters of the Fourth Gospel and although he is referred to there several times, he is never specifically named. It was the Beloved Disciple, for instance, who was lying close to the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper, and who at Simon Peter's beckoning asked Jesus who it was that would betray him (Jn. 13:23). And it appears to have been the Beloved Disciple who was known to the High Priest in Jerusalem and who entered his courtyard during Jesus' trial, and spoke to the maid who kept the door and brought Simon Peter in with him, whereupon Peter denied knowing Christ three times (Jn. 18:15). It was also the Beloved Disciple (alone among all the men who followed Jesus), who is mentioned as being present at the Crucifixion, when the others had all fled and scattered, hiding behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. And it was to the Beloved Disciple there at the Cross, that Jesus committed the care of his mother. "Woman, behold, your son," he said, and to the Beloved Disciple, "Behold, your mother," and from that hour, we are told, the disciple took her to his own home (Jn. 19:26-7). Finally, it was the Beloved Disciple who

while fishing with the others first recognized the risen Jesus on the shore by the Sea of Tiberius (Jn. 21:7).

The last chapter of the Fourth Gospel identifies the Beloved Disciple as the author of that Gospel, (Jn. 21:24) where it is written: "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down" (Jn. 21:24).

Although he is never mentioned by name in the Gospel, the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, has been thought by some, since the end of the second century at least, to be author of the Fourth Gospel, such that since that time this Gospel has been generally known as John's. But at the end of the second century there was a great confusion about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel and its acceptance in the early Church. This particular Gospel appears not to have been known or used by most second century Christian writers, and the evidence we do have suggests that it was first utilized among the gnostic Christians, especially in Rome. At the beginning of the third century, there was even a report circulating that the Gospel was written by the heretic Cerinthus. In Asia Minor, there was even a group known as the "Alogi", that is the 'anti Logos' party that opposed acceptance of the Gospel which heretics had long employed. The Church Father Irenaeus in southern France at the turn of the second and third centuries is the earliest extant witness to suggest that it was the Apostle John that wrote the Fourth Gospel. For Irenaeus believed that the John of whom his teacher

Polycarp had been a disciple was the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, whereas it appears to many church historians that it was instead John of Ephesus, not the Apostle, who was the teacher of Polycarp and that Irenaeus was confused in his attribution. Thus it appears that the name of the Apostle John may have been attached to this Gospel more to gain its acceptance in the wider Church than as an accurate historical memory. The Gospel itself, of course, is anonymous, as are all four of those gospels that the Church eventually received.

Indeed it seems unlikely to me that John, the son of Zebedee, could really be the author of the Fourth Gospel, for all sorts of different reasons. For instance, all the events in which John had a decisive role in the other gospels are not even mentioned in the Fourth Gospel, like the call of the sons of Zebedee along the shore of the sea of Galilee (Mk. 1:19ff), the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk. 1:29), the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:37 par), the Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2ff par), and the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk. 14:22ff par). Nor is John's brother, James, another of the Twelve Apostles, ever mentioned in the Fourth Gospel. And although the sons of Zebedee were Galilean fishermen, interest in the area of Galilee is lacking in that Gospel, for the Fourth Gospel centers instead on Jesus' several visits to Jerusalem. Finally and perhaps decisively, the Greek of the Fourth Gospel suggests a very well educated and literate author, not some poor Galilean fisherman,

and in the fifth chapter of Acts, it is noted that the Apostles John and Peter were, not surprisingly, illiterate. Thus throughout the years numerous others have been identified as the Beloved Disciple, like John of Ephesus, or the Apostle Matthias, or John Mark the companion of Paul and cousin of Barnabas, or my personal favorite, Lazarus.

Indeed, Lazarus is the one person in the Fourth Gospel whom Jesus is specifically said to love, and it is said so repeatedly (11:3, 4, 11, 36). Jesus appears to have often been a guest at the house of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary (Jn. 12:2; 13:23), and it may have been at Lazarus' house then at which the Last Supper was held, where as host Lazarus might have lain close to the breast of Jesus. Moreover, Lazarus' house was in Bethany, only a mile and a half from Jerusalem and near the Garden of Gethsemane, and thus Lazarus could have easily taken Jesus' mother home from the Crucifixion "from that hour," whereas John the Apostle could not possibly have taken Mary all the way back to his home in Galilee so late in the day, with the Sabbath approaching at sunset. And as a native of Jerusalem, Lazarus is more likely to have been a friend of the High Priest, able to gain access into his courtyard. But perhaps most convincing of all is that Lazarus alone of all the others would have been the one person who understood what the Empty Tomb meant. Lazarus who had himself lay in the grave three days and risen, alone among all the others, would have been the one who thought not

necessarily of a robbed grave, but of a resurrected life. Lazarus alone would have been the one to "see and believe."

And perhaps that Lazarus is the real author of the Fourth Gospel is confirmed by the last story recorded therein. Where Jesus thrice asked Peter whether he loved him and then told Peter to feed his sheep, and then Jesus told Peter how he would die. After which, as Jesus and Peter were walking away from the others, Peter asked what about this man, the Beloved Disciple, how was he to die? And Jesus, enigmatically replied, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? And," it goes on, "the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die," a rumor that could easily have been applied to Lazarus since he had already died and risen.

But the author of the Fourth Gospel knew his mortality and tried to put a stop to the rumor, by denying that that was what Jesus had meant (Jn. 21:23). Lazarus apparently knew that there was difference between his death and Jesus'. Lazarus knew that he would again one day fill his own empty tomb, but that Jesus would not. Lazarus' life was only resuscitated, but Jesus' being raised from the dead revealed something else, something entirely different. Jesus' resurrection unveiled the meaning of eternal life. And how appropriate then that the theme of the Fourth Gospel is eternal life, and Jesus is there portrayed as "the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whosoever lives and believes in me shall

never die (Jn. 11:25-6). That is the meaning of the Empty Tomb. That's the meaning of the Resurrection. And we know the meaning of that Empty Tomb because those who didn't know, who didn't understand, saw the Risen Jesus and believed, and bore witness for us, so that we can now say with confidence, Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia. AMEN.