

Intro:

As I was growing up in Central Florida, we lived in a house that had been built just after 1900. It was a two-story, Spanish-style stucco house with tall ceilings and windows. It was designed to have a sort of natural air conditioning for the long, hot, and humid summers. There were beautiful heart-of-pine wood floors underneath the '70's shag carpets. My dad had the carpeting installed because there were five children and the whole old house rattled when we ran through the house. The floors would creak, and the wood-framed windows would shake even with the carpeting on the floor. A persistent occurrence in our home was the nearly daily race through the house of my mother, setting the floors and windows shaking as she called out, "has anyone seen my keys?" She would set off in a flurry of activity stomping back and forth between the back door in the kitchen, where she last may have come in, and the front door, where she also last may have come in. "Where are my keys?!" was a cry of true panic from her because it signaled a possible chain of events in her near future: arriving late to a meeting, missing an appointment, or not getting an errand done in time. Any of these consequences would then reveal the truth to the world: she was a young mother of five children and she didn't really have it all together. People would find out that her façade of "pulled together" was a thin veneer that covered complete chaos. "Where are my keys?" could be translated as "Help!" We children knew she was rallying us to the hunt. In later years the teenagers would sigh and maybe stand up, but kept their eyes on the tv screen – there was no "pause" button – if you missed a minute of the Brady Bunch episode, you had to wait until that re-run came on again...The littler ones would jump up and join in the search, eager to be helpful. We knew the usual places she might drop her purse and keys. There was always a great satisfaction to being the one who found the keys and held them up with the victory cry, "I found them, Mum – they are here!" A small victory won and Mum's peace restored.

Problem in the Text

This Easter we have the account of St. John's Gospel of Mary arriving at the tomb and finding it empty. I think we can all imagine her panic. After all she had been through, all she had suffered as she witnessed Jesus' arrest, trial, humiliation, torture, crucifixion, and death – what new horror was being visited upon those who had loved him? What new twist of pain would the world jab into their sorrow? She had most likely been with the group the evening before that had carried Jesus' broken body to the tomb and wept over it. Now someone had taken the body from them. Her mind must have raced to come up with possibilities. Mary may have been waiting for Jesus to rise as Lazarus had, earlier in John's Gospel. That morning she would then have gone to the tomb looking for a sign that Jesus was alive again, to listen for sounds of movement in the tomb. But she would have expected to have to summon for help to roll the stone from the entrance and let Jesus out. When she arrived that morning, the stone already "had been had been removed from the tomb." Her heart must have skipped a beat as she first took in the gaping hole and the stone to one side. Had the Romans taken the body to keep Jesus' followers from making it memorial to him as a political martyr? Had the Jewish elders who had schemed against Jesus taken the body in a plot to humiliate Jesus further? What had happened? Where was the body of her Lord?

Her key was lost; her veneer of hope was peeling away – what if it wasn't true? If there were no body, how could Jesus rise again as Lazarus had? Mary's worst fears would have risen up inside her. This wasn't what she had expected or looked for that morning. The thoughts of possibilities sent Mary into a panic and she ran. Mary ran from the empty tomb and to the other disciples with the news. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." The two disciples, Simon Peter and "the one whom Jesus loved" ran to the tomb and confirmed that it was empty. The linen wrappings were there, even the shroud that had covered Jesus' face was there, oddly rolled neatly and "in a place by itself." Jesus' body was gone. The disciples went home.

I'm not sure Mary would have been able to walk any more, her breath ragged from all of the running. Perhaps she stayed behind to find another clue, another piece to this unimaginable puzzle. Mary stayed behind at the tomb.

Problem in the World

There are different ways each of us reacts in situations of sudden distress or shock. I have felt my heart race in fear, my adrenaline setting off my "flight or fight" response. I have even gone blind for a few moments from shock – upon hearing unexpected and bad news, my blood pressure dropped suddenly and my eyes lost their ability to focus, my hand searched for the sofa behind me so I could sit down until I could regain control. Those felt like times when I was like Mary, standing at the door of Jesus' empty tomb, trying to make sense of an unexpected and stressful situation. As we read St. John's Gospel we stand with Mary as she weeps in her confusion and desperation and great sadness. But we all want to also share the next moment - we want to be like the one who finds the keys and says, "I found them, Mum – they are here!" and stop her desperation.

Grace in the Text

Mary was not left at the tomb weeping. The story does not end there. It did not end with Jesus dying on the cross. It did not end with him being wrapped in linen and a shroud placed over his face and with his body laid out on the cool stones of that tomb. It did not end with the stone rolled across the doorway to seal Jesus safely within. As Mary peered into the tomb again she was surprised to find two angels, two messengers from God, and then she heard someone behind her speaking – these each had asked her "Woman, why are you weeping?" Supposing the one behind her "to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." In her confusion, Mary grasped at her last thought of what could have happened to Jesus' body. But then she heard Jesus' voice, that beloved voice, saying her name. He held the keys to the mystery of what had happened to his body – He had risen! The story which Mary feared had ended with her weeping in sorrow for her Lord's death and her devastation over a missing body suddenly became her joy at the beginning of the story of our risen life. As CS Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed*, "You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears." It took Jesus saying her name for Mary to catch on that her longed-for, deepest hope had in fact come to pass. What Jesus had done for Lazarus was just a foretaste of his own glorious resurrection. Mary Magdalene took this news, this end of a story that was just the beginning, to the other disciples. She told them, "I have seen the Lord."

Grace in the World

This is the key to the story of salvation and the key to our deep joy: that Jesus, who died, is the one who rose again. The tomb was empty that morning. We have gathered today to celebrate this end which became a beginning. In the Chronicles of Narnia, CS Lewis crafted allegories of the Christian faith into wonderful children's stories. In the final book of the series, *The Last Battle*, Lewis takes us into a vision of what the risen life will look like, of what life after death will mean for us. "And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

We are invited into this new reality, where death has been conquered. We no longer need to rush back and forth, in our fear of death, worrying about what will happen or where we will go. Mary found the keys, she has the good news, that the tomb was empty and "I have seen my Lord."

Christ is risen! Amen!