

RUNNING THROUGH THE OPTIONS

Sermon for Easter B-Jn 20:1-18

LPC, 4/5/15

What's your first reaction when you don't find something you're looking for in the place you expected to find it? Typically, in a situation like this, the human mind starts running through options. When my children were young enough to have hyperactive imaginations and they couldn't find something they were looking for they would sometimes conclude: "A robber must have taken it!" The option that they just might have lost track of the thing never crossed their minds.

Now, at my age, the option that I've just lost track of the thing is usually the second option that occurs to me. The first is usually that the thing really is where I thought it was and I just missed it.

What are some other options? Perhaps I was mistaken and the thing never was where I thought it was. Or maybe it really was there but somebody moved it without my knowledge. Or maybe something happened that I'd never think of in a million years, like spontaneous combustion or alien abduction.

My point is that the absence of something we expect to find has many possible explanations. Our first thought may not be correct, and we might have to run through all the options before we figure things out, if we ever do. Some things disappear without a trace, like my garage opener. That fell into a Bermuda Triangle somewhere.

Absence tells you only one thing: the object you seek is not there. Absence tells you nothing about what happened to the object of your search. To find out what happened, you need additional information: you have to do further research, or, occasionally, rely on a revelation from an outside source.

This is situation in which Mary Magdalene and the disciples find themselves in today's Gospel lesson. All they have to go on, initially, is an empty tomb. The place they expected to find Jesus' body is vacant. Where is Jesus' body? What happened to it? These are questions they don't and can't know. So they start running through the options.

One of the options is my children's go-to: a robber took it. Grave robbing was certainly not unknown, but since Jesus was entombed without his clothes, presumably he had nothing worth stealing. There is also the rationalization referred to in one of the other Gospels, that the disciples themselves had taken the body to make people think Jesus had risen from the dead, when he really hadn't. Since the disciples are among the ones perplexed by the disappearance of the body, we can, at least within the context of John's story, rule this out. The option Mary comes to is that the body has been moved by the caretaker. This would make sense if, as one account has it, the tomb was borrowed in the first place. The tomb's original owner may have wanted it back.

Additional evidence, however, argues against all these options. The grave clothes are still there. That's something grave robbers or the caretaker or disciples bent on fraud are unlikely to have left behind. The plot thickens!

John, the author of this version of the story, gives some ambiguous testimony about the effects of this latest development. John says the other disciple “believes” upon seeing the grave wrappings left behind. But we’re not really told what exactly this disciple believes. We are told that the disciples “did not yet understand about the scripture that he must rise from the dead.”

We are also told that Peter and the other disciple at this point just go home, which would have been unlikely if what they believed was that Jesus had risen from the dead.

What all this suggests is that the so-called “other” disciple was running through possible reasons for the absence of Jesus’ body and that what he came to believe was that a supernatural explanation was possible. However his belief was clearly not yet fully formulated. The disciple’s belief was slowly emerging from things he knew to be true.

1. He knew Jesus said he would rise again.
2. He knew Jesus had died and his body had been placed in the tomb.
3. He knew the tomb was now empty.
4. He knew Jesus had given meaning to his own life.

You have to admit that the explanation that Jesus has indeed risen from dead is not a foregone conclusion.

This disciple’s belief in Jesus’ resurrection was not something he could know for certain in the same way he knew those first four things. He had to know it some other way. Knowing things by this other way could just be what we know as faith.

There are two stages to the Easter revelation in John, and Jesus actually showing up is but the second. The first stage is the discovery of the empty tomb. This is the one thing that all the biblical versions of Jesus’s resurrection have in common. Believe it or not, not all the versions contain an actual Jesus sighting. But they all report the discovery of the empty tomb.

People come to believe that Jesus rose from the dead in different ways. Some privileged few of us, in the history of Christianity, have seen the resurrected Jesus in the flesh: the disciples and Mary Magdalene at the end of this story, for example. Most of us, however, are like the disciples and Mary Magdalene at the beginning of this story. We have to come to our own conclusions about that empty tomb without benefit of an actual Jesus sighting.

We have the biblical testimony. For some of us that is enough. Others of us have to run through other possible explanations, our belief emerging slowly from things we know to be true. If we reach the conclusion from the empty tomb that Jesus lives, our thinking will probably have followed lines similar to those of the other disciple. We know that Jesus said he would rise. We know that Jesus has given our life meaning.

Maybe the conclusions we reach about the fact of the empty tomb come down to the question Jesus asks Mary, “Whom are you looking for?” The implication of that part of the story is that those who look for Jesus find him.

Whom are you looking for this morning?