

# HANNOVER INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP

April 17th, 2022 11.30 Petri Church Hannover

## EASTER SUNDAY

### Order of Service

Music Joh. Seb. Bach, Präludium C-Dur, BWV 547

Welcome

Kyrie [EG 178.9] – Prayer

Reading Epistle 1. Cor 15,1-11

**Hymn Jesus Christ is risen today**

Reading NT John 20,1-18

The Apostles' Creed

**Hymn Now the green blade rises**

Sermon

**Hymn Thine be the glory, risen conquering son**

Communion You are holy, you are whole

Let us break bread together on our knees

Lamb of God, you take away

Announcements

Prayer of intercession & the Lord's Prayer

**Hymn The Lord bless us and keep us**

Blessing

Music Prelude to "Christ ist erstanden" by Berthold Hummel

## Sermon

Vera

Sermon: Dr. Vera Christina Pabst

Date: Sermon for Easter Sunday April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Place: Ev.-luth. Petrikirche, Hannover

Text: John 20,1-18

Theme: How to focus on the resurrection of Jesus Christ according to John

## Grace and peace to you from God our Father

### Introduction

A telescope, binoculars, a pair of reading glasses, a magnifying glass, a microscope – *what* I want to get a clear view of decides on *which means* I use.

A television camera, a video camera, a photo camera or a smartphone, *the amount of time I have to prepare* for the shooting decides on the means I use to capture the moment.

Wide-angle to close-up, a square or a horizontal format, *what* I want to portray with my photo or film decides on how I adjust the lense of my camera and how I cut it afterwards.

Many thoughts and decisions go into the making of an award-winning movie or photo. Our world is full of visual impressions. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, the various messenger apps, they are all successful, because so many of us use their smartphones to take photos or shoot videos in order to share their personal highlights, their everyday moments, ... to influence others. Many put a lot of thought into the composition and the message of their self-portraits.

Just imagine: What if Mary Magdalene had had a smartphone: What would she have wanted us to see of her encounter at the tomb? What kind of pictures would she have taken and shared online, to spread the good news of the resurrection, to influence others – those who have suffered tremendous loss and are in grief and despair with her message of hope and life?

Many of the women who followed Jesus had wealthy family backgrounds. They used their means to provide for Jesus and his disciples. Therefore, I am convinced, if it had helped to spread the gospel in those days, they would also have bought smartphones, data, the necessary camera equipment etc.!

Most probably, we would have so many more perspectives on the life of Jesus, than the four that have come down to us in the Bible. Would it be more convincing or more confusing with all the individual views of the disciples? What if we had had the women talking for themselves and sharing their personal experience themselves?

However, let us focus on how and what the Gospel of John wants us to see about the encounter that Mary Magdalene had that early morning, for in a way John uses similar techniques to those of a director of today's movie scene. For now, if we want to observe what happened, we are dependent on his perspective, on his wide and narrow angles.

### **Scene 1:**

It is still dark in those early hours. It is difficult to see. The director John loves to play with the lights in order to support his message. And yet, we recognize the woman making her way to the tomb in that morning darkness as Mary Magdalene. She is a familiar figure to all those who have “watched” Jesus' movies, for she has been with him from the very beginnings by the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus delivered her from her sickness of demons and restored her to full health (Mk 15,41; Lk 8,2). She was there at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. In contrast to the other Gospels, John keeps the focus solely on her. He does not give the movement of any other women away. Nor does he zoom in on her hands, so that we can observe her bringing precious ointment and spices for Jesus' body. It is just her walking along the graveside that grabs our attention. Then the focus of the camera shifts, so that we can discover from her perspective what she sees: The heavy stone that had closed off the grave has been removed from the entrance.

I imagine, Mary Magdalene stops in her tracks. She doesn't dare to go any closer. She is hesitant to look into the grave. She is not a private detective inspecting the situation carefully with the forensics and all their tools at hand, as we watch it on TV.

She is a lonely first century woman on a graveyard in the dark. There is no facial expression to display her feelings. John's camera stays focussed on the whole scenario: We see her turning around and running. No idea, how she actually manages not to trip in the

darkness, how she finds her feet. The first scene fades out with Mary Magdalene hastily turning back.

### **Scene 2:**

Mary Magdalene arrives at wherever Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved are staying. No matter what has happened during the past days, they are the ones she trusts with her discovery. Nobody could have taken that for granted. She still considers them to be the ones in authority and who should learn about the matter first. However, instead of sharing her observation of the stone being removed she interprets its meaning and says: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

Again, we don’t see the facial expression of those two disciples, in order to learn of their emotional reaction. Once more the gospel of John does not give us any close-up, but zooms out into wide-angle and sports mode, for his camera captures their reaction of breaking into a race to the tomb. The second scene leaves us with the two disciples running off.

### **Scene 3:**

The third scene takes us back to the graveside. John makes us observe how the younger one outruns the older disciple and how he stops at the tomb and bends over. The camera follows his gaze and

focusses on strips of linen lying there in the grave. However, it is only upon Peter’s arrival and his going into the tomb that the camera gives us even more detail: There is the linen and the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. And the more the camera zooms in in more detail you can see that it is folded up neatly.

If you had watched John’s Jesus movie in one go, you might remember a previous scene that this focus alludes to, namely, how Jesus called his dead friend and how Lazarus came out of his grave: His hand and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face (John 11,43f). Though grave robbery was not uncommon, the body of the one who was buried in this grave was not carried away by any grave robbers. After all, they would have not gone through the trouble of unwrapping the body and then leaving the expensive linen behind! By focusing on the details of the neatly folded linen, John swiftly does away with that explanation for the missing body. That is to say: If it was a crime scene in a detective thriller, here is the proof we are to take into account of our reasoning of what might have happened.

Interestingly, John then widens the angle again, but only the other disciple comes into view, not Peter. Somehow it becomes obvious to the viewer that this disciple “saw and believed”, though we are – once again – not given any facial expression or gestures to support his “seeing and believing”. It is the recurring theme of John’s Jesus’

movie. That's why he is so careful in making us see so that we may also believe (John 20,31).

And the third scene has another underlying message: Two men are now eyewitnesses of the empty tomb. Therefore, their account is admissible in a Jewish court (Dtn 19,15).

However, this is not where John's movie ends with two men moving off into the sunrise. The most important scene is yet to come. Otherwise, we would just be celebrating the finding of an empty tomb and a missing corpse.

#### **Scene 4:**

It all begins with a new focus on Mary Magdalene. It is definitely set in a much brighter light than in the opening scene of our episode, though we are not told. Maybe because it is still dark inside her? However, now John's camera closes in on her standing next to the tomb. We can see her tears streaming down her cheeks. Is it her grief over the loss of her close friend and now his body missing, is it the stressfulness of the past days, is it her disappointment with the reaction of the other disciples not including her, that make her cry? Mary Magdalene has certainly more than one reason, but we are not told as the focus is set on her tears, not on her inner feelings.

And yet the camera lense is not so close that it does not capture her movement: Still weeping she turns into the grave. Once again, the focus of the camera shifts so that we can discover from her

perspective what she sees. John plays with our expectations as viewers. It is not the woman with her expertise as a housewife who observes the neatly folded linen, too, maybe even in more detail.

No, when the camera gives us the view of her looking inside the grave, we discover two angels seated where once Jesus' body lay. No greyish burial clothes, but angelic whites – remember those bright colours of advertisements for washing powder?

And it is now that John, the director, presents the first of two dialogues. The two angels – true to their mission as messengers of God – address her, but not with a message, but with a question: "Woman, why are you crying?" And Mary Magdalene answers the same way that she has reported her findings to the disciples: "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him". The camera has followed her into the grave with its dim light, brightened up only by the whiteness of the angels. That's why the camera can now turn its focus on Mary Magdalene turning around from looking at the angels inside the tomb towards the entrance to the grave. The bright light of the morning sun that shines in from there is suddenly blocked by an undistinguishable figure. We cannot make him out, but we can overhear him addressing Mary Magdalene. He repeats the very question of the angels and adds a second one: "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

In Mary Magdalene's mind there is only one explanation. John's camera, however, does not focus in on a close-up so that we could

see whether it was any utensils he had with him or merely the presence of another person that morning at the graveyard that made her think of the figure as the gardener. The camera stays on the person of Mary who has turned towards the entrance and the figure. And John just gives us the words of Mary Magdalene's interpretation of the figures' impression on her. Thereby, he explains why she also asks him for the whereabouts of her friend's corpse and shares her intention of caring for the deceased.

The exact visual appearance of that figure is apparently beyond description, but he is still recognized. With all the different camera angles and perspectives John carefully builds up the whole encounter to this scene. However, now a *word* uttered is the moment that the risen Jesus is recognized: "Mary" – her name spoken by the familiar voice and in the familiar manner (Joh 10,3) is all that it takes. "Rabbuni – my Teacher" and we see Mary turning away again, as she cries out her answer.

A new chapter opens up. The scene for the sequel is set. Once again: If you had watched John's Jesus movie in one go, you might remember the opening scene that this moment alludes to, namely, how Jesus called his first disciples by name back then at the Sea of Galilee. Did Mary raise her arms? In a romantic movie you would expect the two main characters now to embrace. The director John plays with our expectations as viewers again! However, we only hear Jesus words of warning not to hold on to him and how he sends Mary

Magdalene away to share his message with the other disciples. That exclusive moment between the two of them is over. The others are in His focus. And John's camera stays on her in wide angle, as she goes off to share the news: "I have seen the Lord".

### **In closing**

Neither a telescope, binoculars, a pair of reading glasses, a magnifying glass, nor a microscope. Neither a television camera, a video camera, a photo camera nor a smartphone. None of these means would have helped to capture the decisive moment, for Jesus is the one who appears and reveals himself to Mary Magdalene so suddenly. Nobody prepared her for that unique encounter.

We don't know whether a wide angle or a close up, a square or horizontal format, would have been the most convincing way to convey the meaning of the decisive moment adequately, if she had had a smartphone. And yet, there are no other words for Mary's experience, but to say "I have seen the Lord".

According to John's director's cut: It is the restored relationship between Mary and Rabbuni, her risen Teacher, that matters most and not the how. Ultimately, God's perspective on the resurrection of his Son is beyond the scope of our imaginations!

Though many artists throughout the centuries have created masterpieces of it. In John's description of the events of the very first

Easter Sunday there is no photo finish at the grave that documents Jesus' decisive victory, conquering sickness and death.

However, what John wants us to see are the effects of the resurrection, the change that was brought about by meeting the risen Christ:

From grief and despair to hope, from tears to joy, from trying to make sense of it all to finding answers, from loss and loneliness into a renewed relationship with the Risen One, from sitting quietly in mourning to going and sharing what she has seen and heard, from "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb" to "I have seen the Lord", From "It is finished" (John 19,30) to "Mary" (John 20,16) – or whatever your name may be.

For the living One is still the one who sees and addresses us, engulfed in our emotions. He still appears in the midst of our condition to reach out to us, calling us by our names. It is still Him who puts us into the picture and not us creating an image of Him.

In our day and age with its increasing importance of photos and video footage to portray an authentic experience, ... this is the message of hope: We do not have to be eyewitnesses to be able put our trust in Him who appeared to Mary, to Peter, and then to the Twelve, to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters, to James, then to all the apostles, and to Paul, who gave us this list of eye witnesses and the very first written testimony of the resurrection.

No selfie-stick would be long enough, no wide-angle would be wide enough to get all of them and us in to one amazing family photo as brothers and sisters of the risen Christ.

Ultimately, it is still because of her who saw the stone rolled away on that first Easter morning that we still pray for the deceased of our days: May they now see what they have believed in.

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**