

“When You Don’t Get It”

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

When you’re in a place you don’t get it, Jesus wants to meet you there.

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday – April 17, 2022

Seeing the unexpected

It is so gratifying to look out into full pews today. Two years ago Easter fell four weeks after the coronavirus shut down schools, businesses, and churches. No one was sitting in these pews.

The pandemic challenged churches uniquely because churches are about relationships – with God and with each other – and relationships are so much harder when they’re long distance or virtual. What’s more, unlike schools or workplaces, churches are about voluntary relationships. You can choose our church, any church, or no church. Thanks for choosing worship with us today.

Last year traditional worship was on the front lawn. It was fun and different, but I didn’t hear anyone this year saying, “Can we do that again?” Especially our IT team.

As the pandemic progressed the last two years, most of us responded in one of three ways, the same ways we respond to almost everything. We’re hardwired as predominantly thinkers, feelers, or doers. We respond to what we see in these ways. That’s especially true when we see the unexpected, when we don’t get it.

Thinkers – they went to work thinking about the masks and vaccines and shutdowns. They researched, analyzed, and persuaded. It’s what thinkers do.

Feelers – well, they felt – sadness about those who were sick or grieving, life, frustration about Covid, anger about all the divisions, gratitude for any progress.

Doers – I’m one of those. I was busier than ever. What can we do to support healthcare workers, teachers, people who can’t pay their bills? How do we make online church better? How do we keep everyone connected? How do we get our hands on a Jumbotron for Easter’s traditional service outdoors?

Which one were you during the pandemic? Which one are you – thinker, feeler, or doer? The categories are not absolute or consistent, but you probably have a dominant response. Whichever one you are, you’ll find someone like you in John’s story of resurrection morning in chapter 20.

If you remember more people on resurrection day than Peter, John, and Mary, you’re remembering one of the other gospels. I love the other gospels. If you want to know what I think about what Matthew said, for example, come back last year.

Today I’m interested in how John tells this story, and he does so through the eyes of one thinker, one feeler, and one doer. They all saw things that day they didn’t expect to see. As a result, John tells us repeatedly, they didn’t understand it.

The feeler

We first meet the feeler, Mary Magdalene. She is more interesting than you might think, but less scintillating than you might have heard. People inside and outside the church have made up stories about her. Take my word for it. She wasn’t Jesus’ wife or his lover, and she had never been a prostitute.

I’m sure John knows what Luke tells us about Mary Magdalene, that she was one of a number of women who supported Jesus and the disciples financially and practically, and that Jesus had cast out seven demons from her. That makes her very interesting, but those details don’t appear in John’s gospel. What John tells us is that she was among a handful of women who stayed at the cross throughout the horrific scene of his crucifixion. Since Friday, she’s been *feeling*. She still is.

She’s at the tomb before dark on Sunday morning because she can’t *not* be there. She knows it will hurt to be at the tomb, but she’d rather hurt than stay away. When she arrives, however, she is shocked to see that stone in front of the tomb’s entrance had been removed.

She ran to find two of Jesus disciples. We will meet them in a moment. She reported the only conclusion she could make based on what she had seen. She felt it, so it was real: “Somebody stole Jesus’ body and we don’t know they put him!”

The thinker and the doer

The gospel writer now turns to Simon Peter and the other disciple, who is not named, but almost everyone thinks it’s John. Let’s go with that. Peter’s a doer and John’s a thinker. The last time we met Peter in this gospel was early Friday morning.

Three times he denied Jesus. He was in that situation because he was a doer. He had taken his sword, ready to fight for Jesus. When Jesus rebuked him, Peter still followed Jesus into the hearing before the high priest.

As a doer, Peter doesn't get it. He doesn't know what's going on or how it's going to play out, but he's doing to say something, do something.

John stayed with Jesus longer on Friday. The last time we saw him was at the cross, with Jesus' mother. He had accepted the instruction from Jesus to take care of her. He will do what Jesus asked him to do, but he's still thinking. He doesn't get it.

Mary Magdalene finds both of them. The two men get in a foot race to the tomb, and John gets there first. John sees what Mary saw – an open entrance to a dark cave – but he doesn't do anything. He's thinking. When the doer gets there – Peter – he's not going to just stand there thinking. As a doer, he's going in – dark or not, body or not, crime scene or not.

What he sees inside the tomb startles him. It's not at all consistent with Mary's first theory that someone took the body. A grave robber would not have taken the corpse and left behind the strips of linen wrapped around Jesus' body. Nicodemus and Joseph had placed 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe in those cloths. That was worth a fortune. On the other hand, if a disciple or friend had moved the body, would he have carted it off naked? This made no sense. What's more, the handkerchief that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was folded up neatly. Peter the doer was speechless.

Meanwhile, John is still outside the tomb was wondering what is going on. He had been waiting for Peter to do something – yell or come back out and say what he saw. John gets a little impatient and decides to go in. He sees what Peter saw and *begins to believe*. That's what the text literally says. He isn't all the way there yet, but the thinker is on his way to putting the pieces together.

Both John and Peter don't quite get it yet. They can't put everything together with what the Scriptures said must happen. So they just went back home. Perhaps John started telling Peter what he was thinking. Peter would need more time.

The feeler again

Mary had either returned while Peter was doing and John was thinking, or maybe she missed them. We now find her feeling her sorrow and confusion and anger outside the tomb. She won't go in, but bends over, seeing what they had not seen – two angels. Maybe angels are most visible to feelers. Maybe tears are angel sensors.

Most of the time, angels have to say, "Do not be afraid." These angels are less terrifying. They're also interested in what she's feeling. "Ma'am, why are you crying?"

“My Lord is missing and I don’t know where he is.” She senses a presence and turns around to see a man, but doesn’t realize it’s Jesus? Why? A resurrected body is the same – but different.

Jesus repeats the angels’ question: “Ma’am, why are you crying? Who is it you’re looking for?” She just wants to find Jesus. She needs to be near him. “Just tell me where you put him, sir, and I’ll get him.”

The next moment is one of the sweetest in all the Bible. He just speaks her name: “Mary.” And the feeler exclaims, “My rabbi!” Feelers are often huggers, and she wraps him up as if this is the happy ending. It’s happy, but it’s not the ending. “Don’t hold on to this moment. You’ve got some thinking to do. I will ascend to my Father, which means you don’t have to hold on to me. I’ll always be with you. You’ve got some doing to do. Go find my brothers and tell them our Father has brought me back.”

And she does. Now full of joy, she exclaims to them, “I have seen the Lord!”

He loves me

I don’t know whether you’re a thinker, a feeler, or a doer. I just know that however you process what you see, the risen Lord Jesus wants to meet you today. Especially if you’re in a place where you don’t get it, he wants you to see him.

It would take days, weeks, or even years for these three to fully process what happened that morning. The transformation wasn’t instantaneous.

Peter, the doer, would see Jesus later that day, perhaps twice. Then he would go back to fishing. Next week we’ll see how Jesus met him at the Sea of Galilee. But he would come to understand that Sunday morning meant Jesus had forgiven him. Doers need that assurance. We doers impatiently act. We’d rather do something, even if it’s the wrong thing and gets us into trouble. Peter needed a lot of grace, and he got it. If you need grace today for whatever you’ve done, you’ll find it in Jesus.

Mary, the feeler, needed something different. Two or three years earlier, Jesus had freed her from seven demons. Demons, when they possess you, reframe your identity. You think you know who you are because they’re pretending to speak for you. Jesus had truly known her. On Easter Sunday morning, she must have wondered if her feelings would possess her, if her grief would be the new her. With one word, her name, Jesus reminded her of who she really was.

Tim Keller says we live in a culture where we claim that our identity is self-made, and he says it’s not true. We’re social beings, and our sense of self comes from those around us. When someone you adore adores you, you can more confidently claim your identity. What if that someone is the one who came from the Father and returned to

him, the Creator and Lord of the universe? When he spoke her name, she knew she was known.

Then there's John, the thinker. He "began to believe" when he entered the empty tomb. But he wrote the story decades later. He had researched and analyzed everything that happened. He had heard all the alternate theories and the accusations for false motives. The other disciples by now had all given their lives, some tortured to death, for the truth of what happened that morning. John had thought it all through and knew that the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus meant it was all gloriously true. Jesus was risen, Jesus had ascended, and he, Peter, and Mary were all his eternal family. His Father was their father.

What I love about John is that all those years later, he still calls himself "the disciple Jesus loved." Like Mary, like Peter, he's often been misunderstood. People say he's arrogant for labeling himself that way. But the way John writes his gospel and his letters in the New Testament, I would say John is conveying something else. He's saying if you think about this story very long and very deep, you'll say the same thing. This Jesus, who died and rose again, he loves me. Amen.