Early, on the first day of the week

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. 2 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.”

3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head—so carefully wrapped around Jesus’ head—so carefully wrapped around that direction. The cloth around Jesus’ head—so carefully wrapped around had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him 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.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Initial Observations

The Easter appearance narratives vary greatly and are richly theological, usually dealing with issues current at the time of writing. There is a common core, but the writers dispense with “historical” accuracy to privilege theological truth. For reasons of brevity, today’s excerpt stops at v.10. It is virtually impossible to understand the passage without reading on until v. 18.

Old Testament Background

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:1-4)

What kind of writing is this?

It is odd that Mary seems to be absent during vv. 3-10 and that the disciples, whom she alerted, seem to ignore her, apparently. It is odd that we are not told she came back with them although we discover she did (“But...as...!”). It is odd that the BD and Peter simply “went back to their homes” – to do what exactly? These unusual features become tolerable once we realise we are dealing a core tradition symbolically expanded, by the genius who wrote the Fourth Gospel, for didactic and theological purposes.
The Mary Magdalene story would be perfectly coherent on its own, taking vv. 1, 11-18. It would then resemble the Synoptic stories, with a Johannine flavour. So, why has this writer inserted a narrative of Peter’s journey to the tomb, with the addition of the Beloved Disciple? In part, tradition, I think (see Lk 24:24, 12). In part, to contrast the limits of the institutional (Petrine) with the dynamism of the charismatic (Johannine). In part, to place at the centre of this Easter proclamation an important recollection of the Lazarus story – (a) to contrast the outcomes and (b) to affirm love as the key to God’s gift of resurrected life. “Bending down” links those scenes.

A component of the Gospel writer’s objective here is to recount how we come to resurrection faith. This Gospel brings something very special for our consideration. Earlier, in Jn 11, we read that the gift of resurrected life flows from the love of God or God’s distress at the human condition (“Jesus wept”). Correspondingly, the double story here tells us that the move to Easter faith is also a movement of love. The eyes of faith are opened by the heart. Such an analysis explains both the structure of the passage and the oddity of it.

A vv. 1-3 Mary on a quest like the early stories in this Gospel

B vv. 4-10 Partial resurrection faith: love + scripture

A¹ vv.11-18 One-to-one encounter completes the quest

New Testament Foreground

The links between John 11-12 and John 20 are vital to this reading.

Loved: 11:5, 36; 20:2
Stone: 11:38-39, 41; 20:1
Sudalron: 11:44; 20:7
To rise: 11:23-24; 20:9
Fet: 11:2, 32, 44; 12:3; 20:12
Out(side): 11:43; 20:11
Tom: 11:17, 31, 38; 20:1-6, 8, 11
Burial: 12:7; 19:40

St Paul

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2Corinthians 5:17)

Brief Commentary

Verse 1 First day (cf. 2 Cor 5:17); darkness of unfaith; lack of motive; Mary alone (but “we” later) because this Gospel prefers one-to-one encounters; stone.

Verse 2 Contrary to Mark; the Beloved Disciple only in this Gospel; may be the original inspiration of the tradition; in the text Beloved Disciple is a model disciple; notice the logical explanation (cf. Mt.).

Verses 3-4 First – to suggest eagerness and also to make plain the deference the Peter.

Verse 5 Initial description of details to be taken up later.

Verses 6-7 Detail highly significant; the outcome from this burial is contrasted with that of Lazarus (11:44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”).

Verse 8 Chorography is important: both saw the same “empirical residue”, only the one who loved made the leap of faith; “seeing” is a verb for faith in this Gospel.

Verse 9 The comment may seem strange; but full resurrection faith comes by means of an encounter with the risen Jesus (cf. next scene) and by confirmation in Scripture; “not yet understanding” is a theme right from the start of the Fourth Gospel.

Verse 10 To do what? The writer clears the “stage” for the one-to-one encounter to come.

Verse 11 Seemingly no contact with Beloved Disciple and Peter; significantly, she copies their action.

Verse 12 Angels = transcendence; white = resurrection; head = veil; feet = anointing in John 12.

Verse 13 “Woman”: Cana (mother), Jacob’s well (journey of faith); Cross (mother), Resurrection (journey of faith); she repeats her “earthly” understanding.

Verse 14 Standard technique for an epiphany; standard for resurrection appearance stories that Jesus is not recognised.

Verse 15 Jesus repeats the words of the angels; intense irony (gardener; sir, if, take him away); Mary is still “outside” the mystery; no reason to weep; Jesus’ second question takes us back to the first words he speaks in this Gospel: “what are you looking for” (1:58), except “what” has become “whom”.

Verse 16 Interpersonal address (cf. Jn 11-12); the good shepherd knows his sheep by name (10:5); she turns yet again – physically or interiorly?

Verse 17 Lit. do not keep touching to me (implied: as you knew me); peculiar that the resurrection is incomplete because of the “lifting up” theme; cf. “I go to prepare a place”; the distinction are only apparent – it is the one God, the gift is through Jesus going to “his” God; lit. “gone up” – cf. 1:51 (with angels); 5:15; 6:62 (NB).

Verse 18 She is still the first to proclaim; cf. 20:25 and 1 Cor 9:1; she bears witness unlike Peter (“ask those who heard me; they know what I said”).

Pointers for Prayer

1. The disciples are in a state of shock after their traumatic loss. Jesus, the on in whom they had placed so much hope, has been murdered and buried. Then, before they have time to recover they get another shock. The body of Jesus is missing. Have you had experiences in which one tragedy or crisis follows quickly after another? What was that like for you? How did you cope? Who, or what, sustained you?

2. Mary and Peter, and the other disciple, came and discovered that the tomb was empty. In this text no explanation is given. They are left in a state of bewilderment ‘for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead’. Have you been in situations, faced with events you cannot explain, possibly events that have dashed your hopes in another person, or in God? What has that been like for you?

4. Yet in spite of the lack of explanation, the beloved disciple ‘saw and believed’. Have there been times when others have done
something that you could not understand, and which they could not explain at the time, and yet you believed that all was not as it seemed; times when you decided to trust in spite of the evidence? Have there been times when others have shown this kind of faith in you, when you were not able to offer satisfactory explanations, and all you could say was ‘trust me’?

4. Have there been times in your relationship with God when you have felt that you were faced with an empty tomb, and still you believed? What have you learned about life, about love, from such experiences?

Prayer
God of undying life, by your mighty hand you raised up Jesus from the grave and appointed him judge of the living and the dead.

Bestow upon those baptized into his death the power flowing from his resurrection, that we may proclaim the forgiveness of sins, and which they could not explain at the time, and yet you believed that all was not as it seemed; times when you decided to trust in spite of the evidence? Have there been times when others have shown this kind of faith in you, when you were not able to offer satisfactory explanations, and all you could say was ‘trust me’?

The needed conversion of St Peter!

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—be it Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Initial Observations
The presence of Gentiles in the Christian Way from the very start created a problem for the early Christians: how much of the ritual LAW should they observe? One reason it was such a problem is that Jesus was sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and, in point of historical fact, the historical Jesus met very few non-Jews. Hence the great difficulty in the Acts and in the Pauline correspondence.

Where does the reading come from?
The layout of the Acts:
I. From Jerusalem (1-7)
II. Throughout Judea and Samaria (8-12)
III. To the ends of the earth (Rome) (13-28)
Our reading, therefore, comes from the middle part of the expansion of the Word, the gentile mission opens.

What kind of writing is this?
The excerpt offered makes sense in its overall context, as follows:
A. Cornelius is to contact Peter
B. Peter has a threefold dream
C. Cornelius’ messenger meets Peter
C’. Cornelius and Peter meet
B’. Peter reports his dream and its interpretation.
A’. The Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household.
It is a key to the story that Cornelius in inspired independently to send for Peter and that, again independently of Peter (and before baptism) the Holy Spirit falls upon them.

New Testament Foreground
Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:37–39)

How does the Responsorial Psalm relate to this reading?
Psalm 118 (117) takes up the victory of God in Christ.

How does the first reading prepare for the Gospel?
Peter’s sermon offers a summary; the Gospel offers a full narrative.

Brief Commentary
Verse 34 A radical statement and always a challenge to socialised groups like the church. Compare: Dt 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7; Job 54:19; Sir 55:14-16; Rom 2:11; 5:22, 29 Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9; Col 5:25.
Verse 35 This is not works righteousness all over again; God accepts all without distinction and then expects from all worship and ethics.
Verse 36 God and God’s universal care and call to holiness are the subjects of the sermons in Acts. The next few verses summarise Luke’s understanding of salvation in Jesus. God sent Jesus to people of Israel.
Verse 37 “Judea” is meant broadly, i.e. where the Jews live.

Verse 38 Cf. Lk 4:16-30 and especially perhaps Luke 7:18-23. God was with him—and continued to be with the apostles as witness and continues to be with the church. The summary is unusual, because Luke usually concentrates on Jesus’ death and resurrection.
Verse 41 Not to everyone (as we see in 1 Cor 15) but to those with faith. The table fellowship retains its importance after the ministry of Jesus.
Verse 42 The role of the faithful is to proclaim (marturia) and to testify (marturia). Future judgement is important in Luke and in the NT. It was part of the resurrection vision. Cf. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30–31)

Verse 43 This verse takes us back in two ways: (a) to the roots in Judaism and (b) to Jesus’ own proclamation of forgiveness in association with the Good News. Through his name: cf. 2:38 and 4:12.

Pointers for Prayer
1. God shows no partiality: a great, universal vision of compassion. It includes everyone, us all and me!
2. What are the “right reactions”, according to Luke: our worship of God and our living of discipleship.

Prayer
God whose raises us all in Jesus, let your word of hope and new life encourage us to live the Gospel and to proclaim by deeds and words. Amen.

Sunday Introductions
First Reading
Acts 10:34a, 37-45
How would you summarise your faith in Jesus, as teacher and as risen Lord? Listen to the words of Peter.

Second Reading
Colossians 3:1-4
Once we believe in Jesus’ resurrection, are there any consequences for how we live our lives? Plenty, according to Colossians.

Gospel
John 20:1-9 (10-18)
What’s at the core of Easter faith? Love! How do we come to Easter faith? By letting the Risen Lord call each of us by name, because the movement to faith in Christ is a movement of the heart.

Weekday Introductions
Easter Monday 21 April
Acts 2:14, 22-33
The cross was a shock to the first Christians and so was the resurrection. In this speech of Peter, we “overhear” the first disciples using the Old Testament—especially the psalms—to understand what had taken place. The primary proclamation is Jesus of Nazareth, i.e. a historical person.

Easter Tuesday 22 April
Acts 2:56-41
The opening verse is really the climax of yesterday’s speech. The rest responds to the question: if the Easter proclamation is true, what difference should it make and what should we do?

Easter Wednesday 25 April
Acts 3:1-10
Already in Acts 2:43 we read: Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles. This story is not just a healing from the past but a metaphor for the present, offered to us today as believer who may feel paralysed.

Easter Thursday 25 April
Acts 3:11-26
Sometimes Christians today feel that the God of the Old Testament is somehow a different God. In contrast, the early Christians felt a very strong desire to show that the surprising outcome of Jesus’ life and ministry—his death and resurrection—was actually and in fact a fulfilment of things foreshadowed in the Old Testament. God’s continued fidelity was an important part of their faith.

Easter Friday 25 April
Acts 4:1-12
The religious authorities of the time were against the teaching of resurrection at all and consequently very much against saying Jesus was risen. These are the very same people who brought about the crucifixion of Jesus. Here Peter, using the Old Testament, make the case for the resurrection of Jesus.

Easter Saturday 26 April
Acts 4:13-21
The early Christians experienced opposition – but this only strengthened their courage. Anyhow, it looks as though those who were against them were “flummoxed” as we say! Believers can’t really help proclaiming the Good News that Jesus is risen from the dead.

Pope Francis on the Resurrection
Dear brothers and sisters, we must first must firmly have this hope and we must be visible, clear, brilliant signs of hope in world. The Risen Lord is the hope that never fails, that does not disappoint (cf. Rom 5:5). God’s hope never disappoints!. How many times in our life do our hopes vanish, how many times do the expectations that we carry in our heart not come true! The hope of Christians is strong, safe and sound in this land, where God has called us to walk, and is open to eternity, because it is founded on God, who is always faithful.

We should never forget this; God is always faithful! God is always faithful! Be risen with Christ through Baptism, with the gift of faith, to an imperishable inheritance, leads us to increasingly search for the things of God, to think of Him more, to pray more. Christianity is not simply a matter of following commandments; it is about living a new life, being in Christ, thinking and acting like Christ, and being transformed by the love of Christ, it is allowing Him take possession of our lives and change them, transform them, to free them from the darkness of evil and sin.

Dear brothers and sisters, to those who ask us our reasons for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15), let us point to the Risen Christ. Let us point to Him with the proclamation of the Word, but especially with our resurrected life. Let us show the joy of being children of God, the freedom he gives us to live in Christ, who is true freedom, freedom from the slavery of evil, sin and death! In looking to our heavenly home, we will also have a new light and strength in our commitment and in our daily efforts. It is a precious service that we give to our world, which is often no longer able to lift its gaze upwards, it no longer seems able to lift its gaze towards God.