Now and then you hear about a theater production where a director takes a classic play and changes the location to something more modern. Meaning you will have Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides* moved from ancient Athens to a Burger King in Hoboken or Shakespear’s *Merchant of Venice* moved from….well Venice to a cheap casino in Lovelock, Nevada. Part of the reason for this, besides the directors wanting to appear clever, is to make something old relevant to a modern audience. I am generally not a big fan of such miscellany but on days like today I do understand the motivation. It is Easter and everyone knows why we are here. The story is familiar even to the unchurched and so the challenge becomes how to tell that story in a way that makes it fresh. And to be perfectly honest I really have no idea how to do that. Certainly, I could try and give the story a little modern window dressing and hope that the young kids would get excited, but that seems a little cheap and hubristic. So, let’s just talk about the Easter Story as we have it in John’s Gospel and see what happens.

Holy week is a very busy week. We have had the institution of the Eucharist, at the Last Supper, Jesus’ final commandment to love one another, the betrayal by Judas, the Crucifixion and the burial of Jesus. And here today we have the one event that truly changes everything – the Resurrection. When we read the story in John it is obviously difficult not to jump ahead. That is, it is hard not to fill in the missing information with what we already know, but for a moment let’s try and get some amnesia and look at things as they are revealed and try to hear them as if it is the first time. The narrative begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb, while it was still dark. The Gospel does not say why she came, but it probably had something to do with finishing the embalming of the body. Whatever the motivation, it is obvious from the narrative that she expected the body to be there. When it was not, her first instinct was a very human one, at least for someone from California – it had been stolen. And if we were reading this for the first time and not aware of the Resurrection, we would probably think the same thing. After all, if, after church, you went out to your car and it was missing, you would assume that it had been stolen or at least towed. Now Mary, believing that Jesus had suffered one final indignation goes and notifies Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved (most likely John and we will refer to him as John from here on out). After she tells them what she has seen they rush to the tomb. Now, like a good mystery, a little more is revealed when the disciples get there. John, “saw the linen wrappings lying there” but did not go in. A moment later Peter arrives and being Peter does go into the tomb. He notices that the “cloth that had been on Jesus’ head” was not with the other linens, “but rolled up in a place by itself.” At this point John enters and we read this passage that might sound contradictory at first glance. It says that John, “saw and believed” but then adds, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” It is a fascinating passage for it shows belief without complete understanding or if you want it in church speak it shows the mystery of faith. And while I said believing without understanding may seem confusing it is something that is part of our everyday life. I sincerely believe that I love my family but if you asked me to explain exactly why or how, I could not give you an airtight argument. That is the thing we do not always fully understand what we believe. And that is okay. In fact, I think it is better than okay because we are human and a bit obtuse, so demanding that we must fully understand God in order to believe places an incredible constraint on God. I mean if we want a religion where we understand everything perfectly, we will probably end up with something mediocre like what the Greeks had where the gods were not transcendent but rather more like a bunch of randy teenagers. But back to the sermon.

I cannot get inside the head of John so am unable to tell you what it was he saw in the empty tomb that made him believe but there is still a fair amount we can gather from the narrative. John had been informed that the body of Jesus was stolen but upon seeing the empty tomb and the way things were, he realized that there was a different explanation. And that explanation involved the power of God – that is what he believed. And this is where I kind of want to stop. Not in terms of the sermon but in terms of how John was at that moment because I think John’s belief reminds us that, in our relationship with God, belief comes first. It is like what St. Anselm said, “I believe so that I may understand.” John knew that something happened which defied his understanding and his ability to explain but he still believed. Similar to what St. Paul says about our present state as being like seeing in a mirror dimly. We know that there is God and we know of His power but can be at a loss to articulate or fully understand it. To my mind this is one of the chief reasons why humans have come up with things like painting, sculpture and music, they explain where words fail. In the tomb John saw the power of God. We know that he did not emerge fully understanding what this empty tomb meant, but we know that he did emerge with a strengthened faith. He knew and believed that something amazing had happened. Something that reversed the trajectory of the previous days. For in the previous days, sin appeared to have won the day in brutal and stark terms by crucifying the Son of God but that all vanished in the reality of the empty tomb. And even though John did not fully understand, he knew. He knew that God’s power was there amidst the folded linens.

To me the takeaway for today is to be like John to look at the empty tomb and see the linen wrappings and just believe. We need to have that simplicity and trust, removing all the human desires that demand understanding to the exclusion of God’s power. The story of today is the story of God’s majesty as seen in the empty tomb and in Mary telling the disciples that she has seen the Lord. We may not fully understand nor comprehend but if we are humble, we will truly see God. And I bring up humility because the days leading up to now have been filled with hubris and human self-aggrandizement where God was completely dismissed. Whether it was the betrayal by Judas, the questioning of the High Priests or the mocking of the soldiers, the actions that led to the crucifixion were done by individuals who were very sure of themselves. They knew things but did not believe things. They knew and could explain how God should be and in so doing they dismissed and killed the actual son of God. But this morning, John makes no pretense at knowing or understanding but simply trusts that God’s power was greater than anything humanity could concoct. He did not place his ability to understand between his belief and God. And on this Easter Day where we approach the empty tomb filled with the knowledge that comes from familiarity it might be best to take a step back and be humble and say we do not fully understand but we know. We know what we are seeing is the power of God; the power to change the course of human history, the power to break the dominion that death held for all time so that at last we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.