

The Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter 1A

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

for A Sermon for Every Sunday

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

On one evening a couple of years ago, my colleague in ministry, whose name is Joseph, and I went out for a beer after a long Wednesday at work. We drove down to Scott's Addition, a trendy part of Richmond here, to one of their breweries, and I parked the car along the curb. It was already dark, and things were kind of winding down. As I stepped onto the sidewalk and shut my door, I looked into the window of the brewery to see if it was actually still open, and to my surprise, I saw what looked to be my Lord.

I turned around to Joseph, who was a little bit behind me, and said, "It looks like they're still open. But Jesus is in there." Thinking that I must be making some silly theological comment about the fact that Jesus liked to hang out where the people were, my colleague just chuckled and said, "I know. Jesus is everywhere!" So I peered into the window again, craning my neck, as Joseph came around the corner of the car. I knew my eyes weren't lying: there was a guy dressed up like Jesus in the brewery. I had no idea what the guy was doing, but it was clearly the man from Nazareth.

Again, I said to Joseph, "No, really. Jesus in in the bar." So we opened the door and walked up into the brewery, and sure enough, there was a guy wearing a crown of thorns, and a white tunic with a scarlet robe draped over it, with sandals on his feet. It appeared that he was leading the people of the brewery in a game or some group activity. Joseph about fell down the stairs when we saw him. But you should have seen the color that Jesus turned when he saw what looked like two priests, in their collars, coming toward him! He did look like a ghost!

Several minutes later, after he finished his game-leading duties, he immediately stripped off his crown and costume and slunk over to where we were sitting to apologize to us. You have never seen a more sheepish and remorseful-looking Jesus! Imagine his surprise when we insisted he put his costume back on so we could have our photo taken with him. Of course we're going to make it a Kodak moment! We had seen the Lord!

In so many ways, that experience reminds me of what is happening as the disciples first come to the tomb on the second morning after Jesus' death. We have Mary Magdalene and the disciples, all reaching the tomb at different times, peering inside, seeing different things, peering into the tomb again, coming to different conclusions, ending up in different locations, and being surprised with what they learn. And the first Easter message is not "Christ is risen!" or "Death has been defeated!" but "I have seen the Lord." For John the gospel-writer, seeing something is the ultimately in truly understanding it. For Mary to declare she has seen the Lord means she now fundamentally understands who Jesus is and what he is about.

John the gospel-writer does not tell us why Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. It could have been to anoint his body with spices, but it could have just as easily been because she just wanted to be near him, the man who had inspired her and given her hope. She travels back and forth that morning, shocked and dismayed that Jesus' tomb has not just been tampered with, but that they may have a garden-variety case of tomb-robbing on their hands. After that Peter and the

anonymous other disciple take off, almost in some kind of race. But then, strangely, the one who gets there first—who parks the car along the curb and steps onto the sidewalk first—stops and just looks inside. His buddy Peter, still rounding the corner, barrels right on in there, wondering what is going on. Then they're both in there. They take turns understanding, on their own level, why the linen wrappings were rolled up without a body. Only one of them believes what's happened, but then neither of them fully understand. They return home, as if nothing is really strange there.

It's Mary who is left to put the pieces together, but it all comes very slowly for her too, and only through the blur of her tears and sorrow. Distraught, she even carries on a conversation with Jesus at one point, thinking he's the gardener.

That the resurrection of Christ begins with such confusion and lack of clarity probably perplexes us on some level. The strange sequence of events, the wide range of differing reactions, are not exactly what we might expect from the first account of someone rising from the dead. After all, we are more accustomed with the news of death and terror coming this way. In broken-apart bits and puzzling pieces the bad news comes out—whether it's from the doctor over the phone, or worse yet, the coroner, despite their best intentions to keep it straightforward, or whether it's through the media as we filter fact from fiction.

That's so much of how this coronavirus outbreak is happening. We know there have been deaths and quarantines and that people are testing positive, but details are difficult to come by. What was its true origin? How is it really spread? Have enough people really been tested? What happens to people when they get it? It is so confusing, just like so many other scenes of tragedy and despair.

Yes, it is as precious life is shattered and enters its tomb that we often encounter confusion and fear, grief and despair, not when it bursts back from it. Interestingly, though, not one of the gospel accounts of Jesus resurrection has a witness at the tomb as he comes out of it. Instead, we hear bits and pieces like today, first this person's account, then that person's understanding. Some might find this to be evidence that the resurrection of Christ stands on shaky historical footing, but for me and others, it only amplifies its truthfulness. These first witnesses are humans without agendas encountering something totally unprecedented and left with nothing but their real, human emotions and doubt to figure it all out, to report what they know and see.

Furthermore, it is not Jesus' closest disciples, the men he hand-picked to learn his new way of embodying God's law and love, who get a handle on this miracle and marshal this message to its first hearers. It is Mary Magdalene, who stands by the tomb in her grief, who is too timid or maybe too respectful to go inside it like they did, who first begins to understand what God has done. It is Mary Magdalene, whose honest response of sorrow honors all our grief at what death has done to us. All those who have ever stood at a graveside weeping, who have struggled to carry on like normal after the death of a loved one, or who have felt so isolated by grief are there with Mary, seemingly alone.

Loneliness and despair are not how Mary's story ends. Easter puts a twist ending on all the grief we bear, all the sorrow we carry with us through this life. As she stands there she is approached by the very Lord himself, and she only recognizes him when he says her name. She doesn't piece together a theological mystery. She doesn't recall the prophecies in the Scripture like a model Sunday School student. She doesn't dazzle anyone with her grasp on the Apostles' Creed. She simply hears him speak her name...and she knows Jesus has returned. She hears a voice that only one person can have...and she knows God must have triumphed over death and the grave.

She hears and sees the best news, the Mother of all Balm. And because she sees him, she knows that Jesus is Lord of all.

Easter is God's appearing first not to the disciples who run the fastest, or who believe the quickest, but to the ones who are weeping, questioning, stuck in their confusion. Easter is God's surprise that we never know exactly where we might bump into the Lord next, but it's probably best to look around the dark corners of life. The earliest Christians, in fact, built their first churches not on city squares or in the middle of some beautiful flower-bedecked valley that looks like a Thomas Kincaid pain, but basically underground, right next to the tombs and burial chambers of their loved ones. They worshiped the Lord right in the presence in the places where they had wept. They were prepared to greet the Lord, to see those bones rise up in the new creation God was bringing forth in his Son Jesus Christ.

This is what Mary's first Easter message, "I have seen the Lord," has done to people. It provides the courage to look death in the eye, to peer into the open tomb, to gather at scenes of tragedy and loss because we have faith Christ, the Lord of life, is out and about. We are prepared now to see God turn overturn the forces of darkness and evil. That's what seeing understanding Jesus' true life is all about. The transformation from pain and grief to joy that Mary experiences may not be so quick for all of us, but the joy will come. Christ is risen, and we have faith that those who have cried, those who have died, will some day hear him call their name.

The other evening, as we were getting ready for worship on Maundy Thursday, a young man in our choir was complaining that he didn't feel well. He had a headache and felt yucky and was wondering whether it might be better for him to go home and get in bed. His mother lovingly urged him to do what felt best, but suggested he might start feeling better in a few minutes and go on with the worship service. His younger sister, however, who was to be receiving her first Holy Communion that night, felt selfless compassion for him and said, "Just go on home if you feel bad. It's OK to miss worship. You already know how the story ends."

Yes, now we do. We know how the story ends. Mary has seen the Lord. So, watch out, you, me, all of us! You never know where we might bump into him again.

Thanks be to God!