

Believing Is Seeing

John 20:1-18

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.

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.”

Then Peter and the other disciple set out
and went toward the tomb.

The two were running together, but the other disciple
outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent down to look in
and saw the linen wrappings lying there,
but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him,
and went into the tomb.

He saw the linen wrappings lying there,
and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head,
not lying with the linen wrappings
but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first,
also went in, and he saw and believed;
for as yet they did not understand the scripture,
that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;
and she saw two angels in white,
sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying,
one at the head and the other at the feet.

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."

When she had said this,

she turned around and saw Jesus standing there,
but she did not know that it was Jesus.

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."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to him, "Teacher!"

(in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me,

because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my sisters and brothers and say to them,

'I am ascending to my Father and your Father,
to my God and your God.'

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.

Believing Is Seeing

Luke 20:1-18

April 19, 2025 (Easter)

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I.

My friends, I'm going to be placing a rather large challenge in front of you this morning; a hump to get over, if you will. So sorry. I know, I know it is *Easter*, for heaven's sake. Kids have been running around looking for baskets and eggs, nibbling on chocolate rabbits, separating out the licorice jelly beans, and biting off the heads of Peeps. I *know* you got all dressed up to come to church today, that you have big plans, that you are sitting there in the pews doing the math about when to put the ham or lamb in the oven. I *know* that all of you are beside yourselves with joy that spring finally seems to springing and are dreaming, even now, of basking in the warm sunshine of some soon to arrive bright, warm day. So, I am especially aware that today's sermon is going to be a challenge for you at a time in life, and in the life of the world, when we would rather not be challenged at all.

II.

Truth be told, writing the Easter sermon is about as easy as it gets for a preacher. I mean, come on, that's why we call it the *Good News* of Jesus Christ. It is the happiest of happy endings. Jesus, after the pain and anguish of the cross, after bearing the sins of the entire world, after descending into hell and after three days dead in the tomb, is resurrected. I mean, *nobody* saw *THAT* coming.

True enough, he had been talking about it all along: hinting how the Son of Man must suffer, alluding to being taken where one does not wish to go, making reference to rebuilding in three days the temple torn down. Nonetheless, the disciples just could not see it, could not wrap their minds around it, and never imagined the scope of the situation. And, so, on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb of Jesus with the lowest of expectations.

III.

Upon arrival, she is met with a gut-wrenching discovery: the stone has been rolled away, and she assumes someone has made off with the body of Jesus. So, Mary, in her shock and grief, runs back to tell the other disciples. Peter and the “Beloved Disciple” (whom we understand to be John) bolt out the door upon hearing this news headed for the tomb and race to see for themselves.

John gets there first, pokes in his head, and sees only the wrappings which once covered the corpse of his friend; but, still, he does not enter. Then, Peter, all full of bluster but still secretly stinging from his denial of Jesus which was foretold, arrives and actually enters the tomb. Emboldened, John joins Peter in the empty tomb, and they saw, and they believed; but, still, they did not understand. And so then, then...they went home.

IV.

I can tell you, if the story ended here, we wouldn’t have half the Easter we have today. Because it was Mary Magdalene, heartbroken, grief stricken, and left alone, who lingered outside the tomb and wept; and so the story continued. Finally, after minutes which must have surely felt like hours, Mary wiped her eyes and mustered the courage and strength not to enter the tomb, but to simply peer into it. And, there, among the linen wrappings, she saw two angels, and they asked her a rather simple but, given the circumstances, ridiculous question, “Why are you weeping?” Still not fathoming the situation, Mary replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

V.

Then, a voice came from somewhere behind her again asking the very same question, “Why are you weeping?” Turning to look back, and supposing this to be the gardener, she asked after Jesus’ body, where they had taken it and if she, now, could care for it? Then, finally, Jesus (aka the gardener) spoke her name, “Mary,” and, finally, she recognized Jesus, and all the pieces fell into place; she cried out in exasperation and inexplicable relief, “Teacher!”

Now, *that* is a good old fashioned Easter! That’s the story we’ve come to know and love and celebrate with colored, hard-boiled eggs, ham, and marsh

mellows shaped into hens. *That's* the Easter story which brings us here to the church this morning. And so, now we've heard it...again. But if, if...we all went home right now we would not have half the Easter we might have, still, yet today.

VI.

It is at this point in just about every Easter sermon that the preacher (me) gives the listener (you) the old theological "one-too." First, that Jesus was the *one* and only son of God who, though blameless, willingly gave himself up to death on the cross as atonement for the sins of the world in an act of cosmic redemption which serves to restore us to right relationship with our Creator. And, second, that we, *too*, are justified. Not by our works, but by God's grace *alone* through our faith in having received such a gift.

Frankly, though, that is a lot to wrap one's mind around. I can tell you this from experience, because I have been trying to do just that (wrap my mind around Easter) for the past 35 years. All this being said, I would in no way discourage you from trying. I would, however, offer two suggestions if you are open to hearing them and game for trying.

VII.

First, I would encourage you to consider that *figuring out* one's faith is not the same as *having* a faith. Yes, as Presbyterians we believe that ours is a "reasoned" faith (that is, we don't give ourselves over to theological quackery). Rationality can only take us so far, however, albeit in the quickest fashion and following the most direct route. While it is true that reason helps us to arrive at the precipice of faith most efficiently, it does not seal the deal and never will. We still need to make the leap (more a linger, actually) that faith requires.

Which leads to the second suggestion. If, like Thomas, we insist on *seeing* it to believe it, my experience is that we will be waiting a *very* long time, indeed. The easiest explanation for this is rarely do we know that for which we should be looking. Better to start right off with believing and I can almost guarantee that, at some point, you *will* see it. Not just here or there every once in a while, but pretty much everywhere all the time.

VIII.

Human beings, by our very nature, are incredibly curious creatures. There is no stone which we wish to leave unturned. Especially if such a stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb of one considered to be a great prophet, healer, and, perhaps, even the long-awaited and prophesied Messiah.

What John and Peter might have come to believe upon seeing the empty tomb we can only speculate. Our passage simply says, they believe *something*, but they did not yet understand. However, it is a pretty good bet that their belief went no further than the kind of ordinary explanation we humans readily and quickly accept to satisfy our curiosity. That is to say, they settled on the answer which they could most easily wrap their mind around: someone had stolen Jesus' body. (Not to poke the bear, but a very male response: "Should we stop and ask for directions? No, honey, I know where we are.")

IX.

Mary, though, had a very different reaction. Rather than departing the precipice in the same incomplete but satisfying assumption which John and Peter had made, Mary remained right there outside the tomb and she wept. Mary lingered in that uncomfortable leap of uncertainty which every mystery requires, and which is the only place that faith is ever to be found.

While it is true that for many Easter Sunday morning is a confirmation of the faith they only hope to have by seeing others who believe the same, this Easter Sunday I would challenge us to get ourselves over the hump by, first, believing so that, later, we might see. Today is the day to get the horse out in front of the cart. Or, said another way, the palms out in front of the donkey. We do not see the truth of Easter then come to believe, we believe the truth of Easter and *then* we start seeing it all around us all the time even, and especially, in the midst of our tears. Amen.