

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 31, 2024
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

“Seeing is Believing?”

There is nothing quite like Easter Sunday. The hymns are the best in the book. The organist has pulled out all the stops. The brass and choir are at their finest. People are dressed up and so is the church, and kids are hyped up on candy. What’s not to love?

I am deeply grateful that you are here and have chosen to spend part of your day with us, because what is happening here today is literally a matter of life and death, and what is being said and proclaimed and sung and prayed in this church and every church on Easter is the most startling, most world-shattering, most important piece of news imaginable. Christ is risen. *Christ is risen indeed.*

And if you’ve arrived here this morning feeling a little bewildered or frazzled; a little joyful or tired; or slightly distressed, or maybe even sad or doubtful, you have come to the right place because I can assure you that you are not alone in your feelings. Peter, the beloved disciple, and Mary Magdalene felt all those emotions, too. And you know what? Jesus showed up for them, and Jesus shows up for you, too, no matter who you are, where you are, what predicament you find yourself in, or what you’ve done – Jesus shows up and with that death and all its trappings are defeated. This is the good news Easter proclaims.

It’s early in the morning when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb, so early that it’s still dark outside. Unlike the other gospel stories about Easter, in John’s gospel Mary arrives alone. And she doesn’t come with her spices to prepare Jesus’ body for burial, like Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story. No, according to John, Nicodemus already took care of that. So all we know is that she comes to the tomb empty handed and empty hearted because she believes, since she saw it with her own two eyes, that Jesus died on the cross.

When she gets to the tomb she discovers that the stone has been removed from the entrance which immediately raises her suspicions. After all, she knew Pilate

released Jesus' body to the Sanhedrin; the Sanhedrin, of all people. The enemy, the ones who wanted him dead but said they'd give him a dignified burial. Have they taken him? This causes her distress . . . which is understandable. I mean, if we showed up to the grave of our loved one just hours after they'd been buried only to find their body was gone, surely we'd assume the worst, too.

So when she sees the stone rolled away all of her worst fears are confirmed.

She decides to go get Peter and the beloved disciple and tell them about her grim discovery because maybe they can help her find Jesus' body and put it back in its proper burial place.

"They", she cries to Peter and the beloved disciple, "They've taken the Lord from the tomb and I don't know where they've laid him!"

Now I want to pause here to consider who the *They* is. Who are these nameless "they" who so trouble Mary? Are they the Sanhedrin? Or are they grave robbers; they were prevalent in those times. Are they the religious authorities who have heard claims that Jesus would rise from the dead and maybe they've taken the precaution of removing his body? Might they be the Roman authorities with concerns that the crucified body of an insurgent would cause a riot and be a threat to law and order?

Who is "the they"? ~~Who knows?~~

Despite their influence, their identity is vague. But we know them. "They" represent the faceless, impersonal powers at work in our world that often dictate and constrain human life. They are the ones who put up literal or metaphorical roadblocks that impact us, and not in a good way. So we might say, for example, "they've closed the road for repairs," not knowing exactly who closed the road, but knowing that it's going to put a crimp in our day. Or we might say, "they didn't hire me for the job" we so desperately want or need. Or "they said they can't do anything more" as we stand in the hospital emergency room. Or "why are they doing this?" as we wonder why she can't get the healthcare she needs, or why they keep dropping bombs, or why they keep withholding aid. *They* are the ones who work against us, and those we love, and the people God loves, in small and big ways. And it can seem like we are forever at the mercy of "the *they*". And friends sometimes we are "the *They*". Good Friday teaches us that.

But for Mary whoever “they” are, *they* are the ones at work in Jesus’ trial and death stirring up public opinion against him, and “they” have apparently decreed that Jesus’ body must be removed.

“They’ve taken the Lord from the tomb and I don’t know where they’ve laid him!” she cries out.

And it’s no wonder. Mary saw Jesus crucified right in front of her; witnessed the horror of it all. She’s lived under the stress of Roman persecution and likely suffered because of it. These experiences are seared into her mind and upon her flesh. So when she sees the empty tomb and immediately jumps to the conclusion that they have taken the body, we should have some empathy for her. After all, what we “see” is always informed by our life experiences. What I see and what you see may be the same thing, but we may reach very different conclusions about what it is we’re witnessing.

A simple example: when I see a dog, I immediately want to pet it, because I love dogs. Someone else, though, might be afraid of that same dog because they were once bitten by one. What some people see as a threat, others welcome even though we may both be seeing the same thing. Beliefs inform our interpretations, and personal experiences shape our conclusions.

Mary Magdalene witnessed the crucifixion and jumped to the conclusion that Jesus is dead. But the beloved disciple and Peter’s responses to the empty tomb are very different from hers despite seeing the same thing. Peter saw everything and went home; we have no idea what he thought about the scene. The beloved disciple, however, saw and believed. Maybe he remembered the teachings of Jesus. Maybe he recalled the experiences and encounters with Jesus that brought together the ignored, the violated, and the vulnerable. Maybe he recalled his own personal relationship with Jesus. But whatever the reason, all 3 see the empty tomb, and all 3 “see” very different things.

After Peter and the beloved disciple go home, Mary is alone in the garden again.

And what does she do? She weeps. And not just because the body is gone, but because of what it all represents. The open mouth of the tomb taunts with the news that “they” won because all evidence points to one thing, and one thing only: that the claims Jesus made when he was alive were, like his tomb, empty.

But friends, faith is never based upon evidence. This isn't to say the rationalist in us wouldn't like a little proof. But that's not how faith works. John Calvin once said that "Faith consists of assurance, not comprehension." Which is a fancy way of saying that there is a lot about faith that we don't understand. The beloved disciple may have beloved, but John tells us he didn't understand.

Anselm, a theologian of the medieval age, coined the term "faith seeking understanding." Which is way of saying that first you have faith, and then you try to understand what it all means.

In the Presbyterian Church, in our communion liturgy, in our liturgy to receive new members, and in our liturgy to ordain officers, we ask, "Do you trust Jesus?" Usually if someone asks, "Do you trust me?", there's an assumption that we don't have all the facts. If we did, the question would be a moot point. So Presbyterians ask, "Do you trust Jesus?" because we don't assume we have all the facts. There are Christians who believe with all their heart that they have all the facts, but we are not one of them. So if you are comfortable with not fully understanding but are thirsty to know more, you have come to the right place this morning.

Frederick Buechner, who I quote all the time, says that "a Christian is one who points at Christ and says, "I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands. The way he carries his cross. The way he carries me."

Which leads me back to Mary, and what finally caused her to believe that *they* didn't win after all.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" "Why are you crying? Whom are you looking for?"

~~These are the first words spoken by the risen Christ, and what a comfort they are.~~

She doesn't recognize his voice, so she reaches for the desperate possibility that maybe this man speaking to her moved the body, and if he'll just tell her what he did with it, she'll take it off his hands and put it in its proper place.

But then, just then, when she needs to hear it the most, hear the assurance that death isn't the final word; that they didn't win, he speaks her name. "Mary." It

stops her in her tracks; the truth breaks through; and she sees with 20/20 vision the risen Christ.

Friends, this is the moment of resurrection.

They will not condemn him to a tomb. They will not constrain him with grave wrappings. They will not command his destiny or yours. They will not prevent his rising or yours. Because Jesus defies *the They!*

Which means old certainties about life and death have been shattered. In the resurrection, God is doing a new thing, an astonishing thing. The hatred, oppression, injustice, and death that they love to wield have been overturned. They have been defeated. Because Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

Things like justice and peace, compassion and human dignity are not just the idle dreams of the naïve and hopelessly optimistic but the realities upon which the universe rests. And the worst that human beings can do is powerless in the face of God's love.

Peter, the beloved disciple, and Mary may all come to faith differently and be in different places, and they may spend a lot of their time running around bewildered and confused, but in the end they're only running to one thing, and one thing only: and that is toward Jesus and as far away from the "they" as they can get.

What do you think? Can we do the same thing? Can we take what we've heard here this morning on faith, and spend more time running away from the "they" and more time running toward Jesus? Can we turn what often feels like a Good Friday world into an Easter world? Can we allow God's love to work through us to transform ourselves, our communities, and our world into a better place?

Can we do this? And not because we can prove the very foundation of our faith, but because we trust that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Because friends, the truth about "The evidence of Easter is a reconfigured Easter people, people who are no longer afraid of the dark;

people who dare to live by their affections and not by their fears;

people who know that they need not die in order to truly experience resurrection living, . . . people who fear neither death nor life. . . .

In short, people such as you and me who aspire to be people like that. (Peter Gomes, "What We Forgot to Tell You")

*So let us rise with God's Love that brings us together to love one another,
Let us rise to bring God's promise of justice and freedom to earth as in heaven.
Let us rise to remember that each one of us is a part of God's heart, made in God's image, therefore worthy of dignity and respect.*

Because Jesus' great invitation to run towards him begins today.

Because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Amen.

Sources:

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Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, commentary for John 20:1-18.

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Diana Butler Bass, "Reading the Passion on Good Friday, email 3/29/2024, "Together We Rise: An Easter Story For All Of Us"

