

“I Have Seen...”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 12, 2009

Easter Sunday
Rev. John Wahl

Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

John begins his Easter story just a little bit earlier than the other three gospels. While Matthew, Mark and Luke all give accounts of the women going to the tomb with their spices, early in the morning, at first dawn, John describes Mary Magdalene arriving at the tomb, “while it was still dark.” (20:1) Only days before, her hope had been crucified, and so she went to the tomb in the cover of the night not expecting a miracle, not to anoint the body of Jesus, but to grieve the loss of someone who had loved and accepted her. The darkness of the night not only surrounded her, it also enveloped her, it cast a shadow over her, a shadow she could not escape.

Mary Magdalene, the first to come to the tomb, arrived in the dark. We can only imagine what kind of Sabbath she had experienced the day before. Surely, it was not a day of holy rest and renewal. More likely, she spent it in a fury of grief and anger which she directed against the Romans, against the Jewish leaders, and against God the Father and Jesus her teacher. Why did he have to go? Why couldn't things go back to the way they were? Why had she been left alone?

When she arrived at the tomb, she was startled to discover that the stone had been rolled away and that presumably – because she does not look for herself – someone had taken the body away. Then, for a while, John as describes it to us, there is a lot of running back and forth to and from the tomb: Mary reporting to the disciples that it is empty, the disciples wanting to go see for themselves, finally going in to the tomb to verify that the body of Jesus was gone, only the grave clothes remained, then running back again to report the news to the others.

The news that travels that morning is about an empty tomb, but the question of what exactly happened inside that tomb is one that can never be answered. As Barbara Brown Taylor says: “the resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them saw nothing at all because they were still in bed, but as it turns out that did not matter because the empty tomb was not the point.”¹

The tomb that the disciples ran to examine was like a cicada shell hanging on a tree with a vertical slit on the back. All of the living that had taken place there had moved on to another location. That cicada is now singing someplace new with the others. Jesus did not rise to new life and then just sit in the tomb waiting for the disciples to come and discover him. In rising, he outgrew his shell; the tomb had become too small to contain the resurrection.

The empty tomb proved to be exactly what the disciples claimed – that it was empty – but it did not answer how the stone had been rolled away, or why the grave clothes were neatly

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Escape from the Tomb”

folded or who might have been interested in taking the body or why. The tomb of Jesus is just the shell that gets left behind. The Easter story truly begins after all the running back and forth is over, when Jesus begins to appear to his followers. That is what we truly anticipate, the presence of God in our midst; resurrected not to prove a point, but to provide us with the guidance and sustenance we need in life.

For Christians, Good Friday represented the ultimate form of isolation and separation, with Jesus crying: “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). This lament offers the surest proof of our Savior’s understanding, accepting and suffering love for each and every person with experience in loneliness or separation. Conversely, Easter morning offers an alleluia answer that the time of darkness and loss is not God’s final word. Jesus is there to meet us as we emerge from our own tombs; and to greet us, restoring our ability to hope, even when we thought we had reached an absolute dead end. In the final hymn we will sing this morning, we will so boldly proclaim: *Lo, Jesus meets us / Risen from the tomb / Lovingly he greets us / Scatters fear and gloom / Let the church with gladness / Hymns of triumph sing / For the Lord now liveth / Death had lost its sting.*²

The way that Jesus was revealed to Mary was wholly unexpected. Even her encounter with the two angels at the tomb had not been enough to impress her that Jesus was alive, for she continues to mourn and weep, telling them: “they have taken away my Lord.” (20:13) Mary is not satisfied to see the empty shell; she wants to hear the risen one sing.

Finally, the gardener, who is the risen Jesus, calls her by name. Just seeing him, Mary had not recognized him for who he was and had become. You can’t help but to wonder how effective a gardener’s disguise could be and whether – somewhere in the hills beyond Jerusalem – there was lurking a naked gardener, or simply one who happened to have an extra set of clothes to loan to Jesus.

No, it is not the appearance of Jesus that allowed Mary of Magdala to recognize him; it was the sound of his voice. “Mary,” he says, for like the shepherd of the sheep, he knows her by name.

“Mary, like so many who encountered Jesus before her and after her, experiences a gradual awakening that blossoms into epiphany only when the Word is added to flesh, when Jesus calls her into new understanding and insight. It is only then that she can see clearly that the gardener and her rabbi are one in the same.”³

Of course, what Mary might have wanted most still had not been fulfilled. We can assume that she wanted to grab Jesus and hold him and hug him tightly, but he says that she will have to let him go. Easter does not represent a return to the past, for that would be like trying to fit the cicada back in its shell, or Jesus back in the tomb: where we would always be sure he could be found. No, Easter is about new beginnings: Jesus being transformed into something greater; Mary also being fundamentally changed by witnessing the power of the resurrection. Her mourning and loss were not removed from her, but she had been transformed through it.

² Edmond Budry, “Thine is the Glory”

³ Daniel Deffenbaugh, from “Seeds of Shalom”

She came to understand the words to be written at the opening of John's gospel: that, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (1:5)

"Those things that we long for," writes Craig Barnes, "that we miss and beg God to give back, are dead. Easter does not change that. So we cannot cling to a hope that Jesus will take us back to the way it was. The only way out of darkness is moving ahead. And the only person who can lead the way is the savior."⁴

Four more times in John's gospel are we are provided with stories about disciples witnessing the resurrected Jesus. In each case, Jesus knows them, speaks to them, offers them assurance to calm their fears, provides guidance for living their lives, and then goes. The disciples are not meant to hold on to him, because he is not the same person that was dead in the tomb. Only he and the Father know what took place inside that tomb: what was said, what was promised, in what ways Jesus was transformed before emerging to a new life. Our faith is not based on the empty tomb, or what we might think took place within that tomb, but what took place after the tomb. This is where the miracle happened – to Mary and to the disciples – and where it keeps on happening: in our encounters with the risen and living Christ.

It is the called vocation of the church – which is the offspring of witnesses such as Mary Magdalene – to say, "I have seen" and then to become the resurrected body of Christ and bear witness to the fact that flesh might also become word: the good news of life and love. This is the true Easter proclamation: for believing in the resurrection alone is not sufficient to our Christian faith; we must also practice our belief. If Christ has been changed, then we – in meeting Christ – are also changed.

Jesus is not in the tomb; for it is empty. In fact, we are never sure where he might turn up next. In this world, we cannot cling to love – to try and contain it – but instead seek to widen it, to find it in every new moment, and in every new encounter. AMEN.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations. AMEN. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

⁴ Craig Barnes, "Savior at Large"