

SEEING DEEPER INTO EASTER

(04/08/18)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13:11-13
John 20:1-29

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25)

Easter Sunday has come and gone. In a few short weeks the lilies and tulips with their beautiful color and fragrance will no longer grace our sanctuary. The crowd that makes its appearance on the greatest of all Christian holidays will gradually disperse; the people will return to their regular Sunday morning rituals and schedules.

The gospel reading for Easter Sunday begins with an empty tomb. Easter has been referred to as the celebration of the empty tomb. Perhaps you have heard the following commentary on the theme:

The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contain the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian pharaohs. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned because it contains the bodies of English royalty and nobility. Mohammed’s tomb in Media is noted for the stone coffin and the bones it contains. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery is the final resting place of the bodies of four unknown soldiers who died in our nation’s wars.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between the tomb of Christ and these famous burial grounds. These honored locations are famous because of what they contain, while the Garden Tomb is famous because it is empty.

Easter is the witness to the empty tomb, the celebration of the empty tomb. However, the empty tomb is only half of the story. As we heard this morning, Mary *saw* the empty tomb but did not understand. Peter and John *saw* the empty tomb but did not understand. Their lives were transformed not by witnessing the empty tomb but by seeing, by actually experiencing the presence of the risen Lord. The theme of seeing, which Julie Cedrone highlighted in her Easter sunrise service reflections, is a powerful theme throughout the gospels but especially in the Easter and post-Easter narrative.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone early in the morning, so early that it is still dark. She sees that the stone has somehow been removed from the opening of the tomb. She sees what happened but she does not understand what has happened. She runs to tell Peter and John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” what she has seen.

Peter and John run to the tomb that they might see for themselves what Mary has reported. John, the faster runner, reaches the tomb first, looks in, and sees the linen wrappings lying on the place where Jesus' body had been placed. He does not see Jesus. Peter then enters the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings and the cloth that covered Jesus' head. He does not see Jesus. The disciples, confused, return to their homes.

Mary stays at the tomb, weeping. As she looks once again into the empty tomb, she suddenly sees two angels in white. The angels ask Mary why she is weeping. As Julie mentioned in her sermon, it is interesting that the two disciples did not see the angels that Mary now sees. Perhaps Mary sees something that they cannot see.

Mary tells the angels that she is troubled because someone has taken away her Lord's body and she does not know where they have laid it. Then, sensing a presence, she turns around and sees a man standing before her. She sees him, but she does not recognize him as Jesus. Presuming Jesus to be dead, she assumes that the man must be the custodian of the cemetery. She sees but, because of her limited understanding, she does not *really* see. Even when Jesus speaks to her, she does not recognize him.

It is only when Jesus calls her name that Mary's eyes are opened. She sees the risen Lord in her presence. She tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Note how often the word "see" appears in the Easter story as recorded in the Gospel of John: 14 times in 29 verses. Note how important it is to the unfolding revelation of the risen Christ. Even though Mary, Peter, and John see the empty tomb, they do not grasp the power and the mystery of the resurrection. It is only when they actually see Jesus that they understand.

Many of us apparently hail from Missouri. We want to be shown something; we want to see it for ourselves. In order to believe, most of us need some tangible, visible evidence. We might have *heard* that, thanks to the decorating talents of David Sickles, our sanctuary is especially beautiful on Palm Sunday and Easter, but once we actually look at the altar cross adorned with palms and then lilies, the flowers, and (thanks to David Crane and Darlene Sanderson) the standing Lenten and Easter cross that graces the chancel, we *know* we have a beautiful church! We may have heard that the pastor of this church is really hip, but when you actually see the sign in front of the church that reads: YOLO JK BTW BRB and is signed JESUS, you *know* this guy is a cool dude!

Unfortunately, when it comes to the spiritual dimension of life, our vision is poor, weak, and inadequate. At best, we are short sighted or myopic. At worst, we are blind. We are blind to our Lord's presence in the world, in other people, and also in us.

As we heard this morning, the apostle Paul tells us that in this life we see God "as in a mirror dimly" or "through a glass darkly" (in another translation). Our ability to see God is restricted by our limited faith. Like Mary, we fail to recognize the risen Christ even when he is standing next to us.

Our experience of God is limited not by the size of our brains but by the size of our hearts. This is because although we see with our eyes, we also see with our hearts. Seeing with the heart is a different kind of seeing. As the existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, "Cold grey eyes do not know the value of things." If you don't think this is true, try looking at your loved ones, at your brothers and sisters, at refugees and immigrants with cold grey eyes, and see how quickly it will kill not only love but also empathy and compassion. We need to see with our hearts as well as our eyes if we are to see the risen Christ. We need to see with our hearts as well as our eyes if we are to see other people and ourselves as God sees us, *because God sees all of us with his heart.*

As individuals, as a nation, and as a world we dwell in the land of deep darkness. We fail to walk in the light, that light that came into the world through Jesus. Because we walk in darkness we fail to discern God's presence in our lives. We fail to experience the risen Christ who dwells within us, who walks with us on the road of life. As Paul tells us, our vision of the risen Christ is as limited as our vision would be if we were staring into a cloudy mirror or trying to see through a piece of dark glass.

Paul's metaphorical use of a mirror to describe our sight is interesting. When we stare into a mirror we see only ourselves. Paul tells us that our perception of ourselves is dimmed or distorted when we do not see through the eyes of faith. Paul tells us that unless we see ourselves and others through the eyes of love, the kind of seeing that comes from the heart, it will be as if we are staring into a cloudy or dulled mirror.

The Gospel of John tells us that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus dwelt on earth in human form for approximately thirty-three years. Of these years, only two or three were involved in a ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Then he died. Before he died, Jesus told his disciples that he

would return to earth in a new form. In this new form, as the Holy Spirit, they could experience him everywhere--in the world and also within themselves.

Through the resurrection Jesus becomes present to the world in a new way. This makes it easier for some people to see him, people like the apostle Paul who had never met the human Jesus. It makes it more difficult for other people, for those who do not see. It made it difficult for some of Jesus' early disciples.

Later in the day of Mary's encounter by the tomb, the disciples gather behind locked doors. They are confused by what they have heard; they do not understand what it means. Suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. When the disciples see that it is the Lord, they rejoice! Jesus then breathes on them, filling them with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas is not with the others when Jesus appeared. When the disciples tell him what they experienced, he says that unless he sees for himself, he will not believe.

A week later, Jesus again appears to the disciples. This time Thomas is present. Jesus tells Thomas to feel the nail holes in his hands and the wound from the spear in his side. Thomas suddenly realizes that Jesus has not been defeated by death but is present to them and to the world in a new way. Jesus says to him,

Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe. (John 20:29)

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Blessed are *those of us* who see as if in a mirror dimly, who see through a glass darkly, and yet believe.

The testimony of Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Paul help us to understand that seeing is at the heart of believing. Once we see the Lord, once we experience his presence in our lives and in the world we will believe that he is there even during those dark times in our lives, in the life of our nation, and in the life of our world when it is difficult to discern his presence.

We all know the saying that "seeing is believing," but believing is also seeing. To believe is to see through the eyes of faith. Our faith helps us see. It helps us to see ourselves and to see life in a certain way. It helps us to see deeper. It helps us to see our brothers and sisters as children of God.

Look at this woven pattern (hold up the "Jesus" weave). What do you see when you look at this? Do you see only lines of various shapes? There is a word hidden in this

weave. The word that is both hidden and revealed is “Jesus.” It’s there, but it may become lost in the background. For those of you who can’t see it yet, don’t worry. Trust me. If you keep looking long enough, it will emerge.

I can’t prove to you that this word is there. I can’t even tell you how to see it. I can only invite you to look. I can assure you that it’s there. The fact that I see it doesn’t do *you* any good; you have to experience it yourself. Once you see it, you have it for life.

Actually, that’s not quite true. Even though I have seen the word “Jesus” emerge from the background of this weave, there are times when I just can’t see it. It gets lost. This is when belief becomes important because my belief that it is there helps me to see it. Because I know it’s there, I keep looking. Then, suddenly, I discover it once again.

Once you get the idea, you can see Jesus every time you see this weave. This is also true of life. Once you experience the risen Lord, you can see him everywhere. You can see him in yourself. You can see him in other people. You can see him in the world. You will see him not through a glass darkly or in a cloudy mirror, but as a clear and radiant presence!

We are now entering into the liturgical season of Easter. This season invites us to open our hearts to the presence of our risen Lord, to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. If we see through the eyes of faith, if we see with our heart we will experience our Lord not only in worship but also in the little moments of our daily life. If we discover or rediscover him here, we will be able to discover or rediscover him in other people and within the depths of our soul. Just by seeing him we are turning his spirit loose in the world!

May the blessings of this Easter season clarify your vision, strengthen your faith, and help you to see yourself, others, and life more clearly in the year to come.

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