

THE STORY ISN'T OVER!

(04/28/19)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-31

“And now here is my secret, a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” (Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *The Little Prince*)

It is especially meaningful to meet in this sanctuary the first Sunday after the celebration of Easter. Today is actually the second Sunday of the Easter season (for we count Easter as the first Sunday). The Easter season, which includes the celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven and ends with the disciples' experience at Pentecost, is an affirmation that the story of salvation, the story of resurrection and new life does not end with the events of Easter Sunday.

In his last week with his disciples in human form, Jesus tells them he is going to die. The disciples are understandably confused and dismayed. Then Jesus tells them that this will not be the end of the story. Just as a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die to bear fruit, he also needs to die to bear fruit. He tells them he will rise from the dead and then he will be present to them and to the world in a new way. It is doubtful whether the disciples, who were not the sharpest bowling balls in the drawer, understand this teaching, or that after the devastating experience of their Lord's crucifixion they even remember what he said.

Jesus' body is placed in the tomb that was provided by Joseph of Arimathea shortly before sundown on Friday, the day he was crucified. Because the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown, no work, including the burial of the dead, can take place on Saturday. Sometime between Friday night and Sunday morning Jesus rises from the dead. When the women arrive at the tomb shortly before dawn on Sunday, they discover that it is empty.

As I mentioned last week, it seems to me that the central message of our faith is not that Jesus died for us, though we believe that to be true. The central message is not that the tomb was empty, though we also believe that to be true. The central message is not even the affirmation that Jesus rose from the dead, that he ascended into heaven, though we believe that to be true as well.

The central message of the Gospel is the proclamation that *Jesus lives*, that he lives in the world and also in us! The most important part of the story is, therefore, not Easter Sunday but what happens *after* Easter Sunday. It is how, in their post-resurrection encounters with Jesus, Mary and the other disciples rediscover him--in the world and in their lives.

This morning I would like to push this one step further. I think the central message of the Resurrection is not the *belief* that Jesus lives in the world and also in us. It is the *discovery* that Jesus lives in the world and also in us. When we discover or rediscover Jesus in our lives, as Mary and the disciples did, resurrection is no longer a matter of religious belief; it is a matter of personal experience. When this happens, we will no longer believe; we will *know*!

When we examine the accounts of the post-resurrection experiences, we discover that the four gospels differ in their descriptions of what Mary and the other disciples experienced on the day that we celebrate as Easter Sunday and on the days that follow.

In the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to the tomb to anoint the body. When they arrive, they discover that the stone has been rolled away. A young man, dressed in a white robe, tells them that Jesus has been raised, that he is not here. He tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him. The women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Overcome with terror, they don't even do as the angel instructs. They say nothing about what they experienced to the disciples.

In the Gospel of Matthew, which was written approximately twenty years after the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James go to the tomb. Suddenly there is a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, comes and rolls back the stone. The angel tells the women not to be afraid for Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised. Once again, the women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Jesus encounters them briefly while they are on their way to tell the disciples what has happened.

In the Gospel of Luke, which was written approximately the same time as the Gospel of Matthew, Mary and the other women see two men in dazzling clothes sitting in the empty tomb. The men ask the women why they seek the living among the dead. This is a wonderful question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" They remind the women how Jesus told them he would be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and rise again. According to Luke, the women tell the disciples of their experience, but the disciples do not believe them.

It is only in the Gospel of John, the last of the gospels to be written, that Mary encounters Jesus at the tomb. Mary at first believes Jesus to be the gardener. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes him. Jesus tells her not to touch him because he has "not yet ascended

to the Father.” He then tells her to go to the other disciples and tell them that he is ascending “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord. John gives us no indication of how the disciples received or responded to this news.

As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of Luke, later that day two of Jesus’ disciples or close followers are walking on the road to Emmaus. They are probably heading back home. Little more than a rumor spread by a woman had whispered its way out of the night of their despair. Though they are traveling in daylight, the two disciples are dwelling in darkness.

As they journey homeward, confused and dejected, Jesus appears and walks along with them. The followers/disciples see him and talk to him, but they do not recognize him.

The disciples tell their traveling companion what has happened. They tell him about the crucifixion. They mention how the women told them that their Lord has risen from the dead. Jesus listens patiently to their account. Finally, he can restrain himself no longer. He says, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe . . .”

In this statement Jesus implies that it is not because of a problem with their eyes and ears that they do not recognize him. It is because of a problem *with their heart*. He does not accuse them of being deaf and blind, but of being “slow of heart.” That is a profound observation or accusation! Perhaps, like the disciples, we should think about what it means to be “slow of heart,” the impact that this has on our faith as well as our relationships.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupery said in *The Little Prince*, “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Why are the disciples unable to recognize Jesus? One option is that Jesus may have appeared in a somewhat different human form. He may not have looked like himself. This would explain why Mary does not recognize him at the tomb and why the disciples do not recognize their traveling companion. However, I am unable to understand why Jesus would disguise himself or why he would reappear in a different form.

There is another explanation. It is possible that Mary and the two disciples don’t see Jesus because they aren’t looking for him. Because they aren’t looking for him as a living presence in the world and in their lives, they see but they do not know what it is that they see.

Their lack of faith prevents them from seeing what is right before their eyes. They are seeing with their eyes, not with their heart.

These two disciples witnessed their Lord's crucifixion. They were there when his body was laid in the tomb. They experienced a tremendous loss. However, contrary to what they believe, Jesus is not dead. He is not separate from them. He is with them that very moment. In fact, he is with them even more fully now that he is no longer in human form. He is with them wherever they go. He is walking with them even when they believe they are walking alone.

When they sit at table with Jesus, the disciples' eyes are opened. They suddenly realize that they are in the presence of their Lord. They first see with their eyes, then they see with their heart, then they see with their eyes. When we see with our heart, we will be able to experience Jesus' presence. Then we will know the true meaning of Easter!

Note that the disciples are not looking for Jesus. This is why they don't recognize him even when he is standing next to them. If we, like the disciples, are not looking for Jesus, it might explain why we never experience his presence. It might explain why we feel that we are walking the difficult and painful road of life alone, when in reality Jesus is walking with us.

Even though the disciples weren't looking for Jesus, Jesus was looking for them. Even though they weren't reaching out to Jesus, Jesus was reaching out to them. Like the disciples, even when we are not looking for Jesus, Jesus is looking for us; even when we are not reaching out to Jesus in worship and prayer, Jesus is reaching out to us.

After their epiphany, the disciples, like Mary, realize that they cannot hold onto this new and different experience of their Lord. As soon as they recognize him, he vanishes. They later encounter him in other ways and places. The eternal Christ is no longer limited by his human incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. There are now no limits to the ways that his followers might experience him, the places where they might see him.

How can we experience our risen Lord? We can experience him in worship and in the sacraments. We can experience him in music that touches our soul. We can experience him in prayer. We can experience him in the love that we feel and express in many different ways, the love that we receive. If we open our heart, we may experience our risen Lord in some barely discernible stirring within us. We may hear him speak to us, comfort us, and set our feet on the path he would have us walk.

Jesus promises us that those who truly seek will find. If we look for Jesus, we will find him. If we do not look, like the disciples, we will not see what is right before our eyes.

If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see how Jesus is trying to create a world of peace, a community of caring and compassion. If we see with our heart, we will see the face of Jesus in our brothers and sisters. We will see Jesus in those who are hungry and thirsty, in those whose lives are torn apart by war, in those who, because of their gender identity or sexual orientation are outcasts in our society. We will see Jesus in the immigrant and the refugee.

When we see with our heart, we realize that God loves us. Out of this realization, we will answer Jesus' call to care for those around the world who are hungry and thirsty, those who lack medical care, those who have been displaced from their homes and their homelands. We will welcome the social outcast into our lives and into our church. We will know that inasmuch as we do it to one of the least of these, we do it to Jesus.

As post-resurrection Christians, we pray that Jesus will open not only our eyes but also our hearts, that we will not only see but actually perceive, that we will recognize our risen Lord in our daily lives. We pray that, like the disciples, we will see the glimpses of truth that are revealed to us, that the slowness of our hearts might be quickened, and that we might be set free from everything that holds us back from fullness of life. As we rediscover Jesus, we will rediscover ourselves in new and powerful ways.

As we journey forth in this Easter season and throughout the seasons of our lives, let us remember that the story isn't over. In fact, it will never be over. And let us remember that we, like the disciples, are an important part of the story!

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