

RESURRECTION--SEEING IS BELIEVING

(04/24/2022)

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—at least the Easter we celebrate in the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Orthodox Easter, which the people of Greek heritage refer to as Greek Easter, is celebrated today. Since we have at least one person in our church of Greek heritage, we cannot let the day pass without saying “Christos Anesti!” which means “Christ is risen!” If you were to say this to a Greek person today, you would receive the response, “Alithos Anesti!” which means “Truly, He is Risen!” or “He is Risen Indeed!” You could also say “Kalo Pascha!” which means “Happy Easter!” Or you could say “Kali Anastasi!” which means “Good Resurrection!” So just in case you encounter a Greek person (like Marlene Joe) in your travels today, I’m sure you will impress them!

However, the Easter that we celebrate in this church, which we refer to as the *real* Easter, has come and gone. By next Sunday, the lilies that adorn our altar will no longer grace our sanctuary. The crowd that makes its annual appearance on this special day will disperse as people return to their regular Sunday morning rituals. The cross in the chancel, which was constructed by David Crane, which is set up every year by Bill Guenon, and which is decorated every year by Darlene Sanderson, will remain in place throughout the Easter season, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, though it is now draped in white rather than the purple of Lent.

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 this 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. (Actually, I believe there are only three, but that’s not the point.)

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 celebration of the empty tomb. However, the empty tomb is only half of the story. As we heard this morning, Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb but did not understand. Peter and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, saw the empty tomb but did not understand. Their lives were transformed not by witnessing the empty tomb, but by experiencing the presence of the risen Lord!

Last Sunday, at both the United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service and at our own Easter Sunday service, we read the account of the resurrection as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew. Today we listened to a slightly different version of what happened. According to the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone early in the morning. She sees that the stone has been removed from the opening of the tomb. She sees 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, who 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 remains at the tomb, weeping. As she looks once again into the tomb, she suddenly sees two angels in white. The angels ask Mary why she is weeping.

Mary tells the angels that she is troubled because "they," perhaps the Roman guards, have 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. Because she presumes Jesus to be dead, she assumes that the man who is standing before her can't be Jesus; he must be the custodian of the cemetery. Mary 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 suddenly sees the risen Lord in her presence. She later tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Note how often the word "see" appears in the Easter story; just in case you weren't counting, it appears 14 times in 29 verses. Note how important seeing 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 see Jesus, when they see the risen Christ, that they understand.

I am aware of the importance of seeing as I watch my twenty-three-month-old grandson, Miles. Miles looks at everything. He looks carefully at everything. He may not understand how everything works, like the front loader that is just outside his bedroom window, but he watches it very carefully, very thoughtfully.

A child sees things. A child sees things as if they were being seen for the very first time—which may be true for him/her. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we adults could see everything as if it were being seen for the very first time? It would restore that sense of magic that we had as children, that sense of magic which we lost along the way in the process of growing up. It would restore the sense of discovery that we first have when we meet a new person—before we have made up our mind that we know all there is to know about the person, the belief that our husband, our wife, our children, our friends can no longer surprise us. It would restore that sense of magic and mystery that we had as children when we saw a flower or heard a bird sing.

This insight was expressed by Peter Matthiessen, a Zen thinker and explorer who wrote *The Snow Leopard* describing his pilgrimage, his search for the rare snow leopard in the same region of Northwestern Nepal and the Tibetan Himalayas that I have hiked. Matthiessen says,

Soon the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day . . . we become seekers.

Note that the word “see” is contained in the word “seeker.”

The German poet, playwright, and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), though a devout Christian, was critical of many of the teachings of the Christian church. He believed that Christian theology had departed radically from the teachings of Jesus. (Of course, I agree with Goethe.) Goethe was an inspiration to many great thinkers, including Carl Jung, Friedrich Hegel, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. One of my favorite Goethe quotes is the following:

Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than looking.

I think Goethe is telling us that once we “know” something, our mind closes. For example, if we think we “know” the deepest truths about God and Jesus, we don't need to think about it anymore; we don't need to consider alternative explanations or explore alternative spiritual paths. When we know, there is no room for the doubt which the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich tells us is an essential part of what he calls “the dynamics of faith.”

According to Goethe, thinking is better than knowing. Thinking opens the doors that knowing closes. But even thinking, which uses words and concepts that often fit over the magic and mystery of reality like a straitjacket, is less interesting, is less important than simply looking—looking through the eyes of a child. When Jesus says that “Unless you become like a little child, you cannot experience the kingdom of God,” I think Jesus is agreeing with Goethe. Actually, it would be more correct to say that Goethe is agreeing with Jesus.

Mary Magdalene, the disciples, Thomas, and the apostle Paul testify to the importance of looking, the importance of seeing. They show us that seeing is an important part 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 when it is difficult to discern his presence.

I don't think it's necessarily bad that so many of us hail from Missouri. To believe something, most of us need some tangible, empirical evidence. For example, we might have been told that our sanctuary is especially beautiful on Easter Sunday, but once we look at the palms, lilies, and the Easter cross that grace the chancel, we know we have a beautiful church! Seeing is an essential part of believing!

I find this insight consonant with something the Dalai Lama once said. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, tells us not to believe a particular teaching because he, the 14th Dalai Lama, said it. He tells us not to believe a particular teaching because Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, said it. He tells us not to believe a particular teaching because we find it in the sutras, the sacred teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. He says we should take the teaching and try it on in our life. If it feels right; if it leads us to live a better life, than we should hold fast to it. If it doesn't work, we should throw it away.

If Christianity were fearless enough to step outside its treasured doctrines and teachings; if it could refrain from grasping, from holding tight to the answers we “know” to be true; if we were to take an openminded stance toward the teachings of Jesus, not only thinking about them but trying them on to see if they are true, we might not only rediscover Jesus, I believe we would greatly decrease the possibility of religious wars. Of course, the same is true for Islam and other religions as well.

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 in us.

The apostle Paul tells us that in this life we see God “as in a mirror dimly.” Our ability to see God is restricted by our limited faith. Like Mary, we fail to recognize the risen Christ even when the risen, the eternal Christ is standing next to us.

Our experience of God is limited not only by the size of our brains but also by the size of our hearts. This is because we see with our eyes, but we also see with our hearts. Seeing with the heart is a different kind of seeing. As the German existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “Cold grey eyes do not know the value of things.” We need to see with the heart as well as the eye if we are to see the risen Christ. We need to see with the heart as well as the eye if we are to see other people and ourselves as God sees us, because God sees with the heart.

As individuals, as a nation, and as a world, we currently dwell in “a land of deep darkness.” We fail to walk in the light, the light that came into the world through Jesus. Because we walk in darkness, we fail to discern the presence of God 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 of ourselves would be if we were staring into a cloudy mirror.

The mirror is an interesting metaphor. When we stare into a mirror, we see only ourselves. Our ego, our self-centeredness distorts our vision of other people and of life. Paul tells us that our perception of other people, of ourselves, and of life 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 prologue of the Gospel of John tells us that the Logos, 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, only two or three of which were devoted to 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, they could experience him not only as they did when he was in human form; they could experience him everywhere—not only in the outer world, but also within themselves!

This teaching was difficult for Mary and the other disciples to grasp. Scripture tells us that even after seeing the empty tomb, they were confused. Later in the day of Mary’s encounter by the tomb, the disciples are gathered behind locked doors. They are bewildered by what they have been told; 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, however, was not with the others when Jesus appeared. When the disciples tell him what they saw, 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 invites Thomas to feel the nail holes in his hands and the wound from the spear in his side. When Thomas does, he 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 of us 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, the disciples, and Paul is that seeing is 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 and in the life of our world when it is difficult to discern his presence.

Look at this woven pattern that Millie Blood made for me many years ago, when I was the pastor of Pilgrim Church. (*Hold up the “Jesus” weave.*) What do you see when you look at this? Do you see only vague patterns of green and white? There is a word hidden in this weave. The word is “Jesus.” It’s there, but at times it is indistinguishable from the background. For those of you who can’t yet see it, or who are reading this reflection or listening to it online, trust me. If you could see what I am holding up, if you kept looking long enough, it would emerge.

I can’t prove to you that this word is there. I can’t even tell you how to see it. However, I can 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 this weave, there are times when I just can’t see it. It gets lost. This is when belief becomes important; my belief that it is there helps me to keep looking. Then, suddenly, I discover it once again!

Once you get the idea, you can see Jesus every time you see this weave. 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, but as a clear and radiant presence!

At a time when hundreds of millions of children around the world die of hunger, tuberculosis, malaria, and measles each year, when billions live in poverty, fear, and oppression, when conflict in the Middle East and in Sudan consumes so many lives, at a time when the people of Ukraine are devastated by the evils of a type of war we have not seen in Europe in

almost eighty years, we need to see more clearly. We need to see our Lord just as Mary and the disciples did that first Easter. We need to experience the awakening of the Holy Spirit within us, that Spirit which the Lord breathed on his disciples. We need to experience the peace which the risen Christ can bring to us as individuals and as a 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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