

THE STORY ISN'T OVER!

(04/16/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-31

“A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.”
(Jesus—John 16:16)

“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*)

This is a special time, a special season of the liturgical year. The powerful symbols of Holy Week and Easter still grace our sanctuary: the standing wooden cross draped with the violet of Lent replaced with white; the crown of thorns atop the cross replaced by a crown of white dogwood blossoms; and the resurrection cross adorned with lilies in the center of our altar. The paraments and my stole throughout this season are white. To be technical, today is the second Sunday of the Easter season, for Easter itself is the first Sunday. The Easter season, which includes the celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven and concludes with the disciples' experience of the Holy Spirit 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 (note that this was his last week with his disciples *in human form*), Jesus tells them he is going to die. The disciples are 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 in a new way. Up to now, in his human form, he ministered to people as an itinerant preacher and healer. Following his crucifixion and burial, he will rise from the dead. When this happens, he will be present to them and to the world in a new way. It is doubtful whether the disciples, who are 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 a tomb that was provided by one of his followers, 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 the tomb 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 of our faith is not that the tomb was empty, though we also believe that to be true. The central message of our faith 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 that *Jesus lives*, that he lives in the world and that he also lives in us! The most important part of the story is, therefore, not Easter Sunday; it is 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!

Let's just push this one step further. The central message of the Resurrection is not the *belief* that Jesus lives in the world and in us. It is the *discovery* that Jesus lives in the world and 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 covering the entrance to the tomb 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. According to Mark, the women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Overcome with terror, they don't even do as the angel instructs. When they return to where the disciples are gathered, they say nothing about what they experienced.

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 from the entrance to the tomb. The angel tells the women not to be afraid, for Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised from the dead. Once again, the women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. According to Matthew, 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?" This question, and our answer to this question are going to be our central focus in worship throughout this Easter season. The two angels 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, the day we celebrate as Easter Sunday, 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 suddenly appears and walks along with them. The followers/disciples see him and talk to him, but for some reason, they do not recognize him.

The disciples tell their new traveling companion what has just happened in Jerusalem. They tell him about the crucifixion. They mention how the women told them that their Lord has risen from the dead, but they don’t know whether to believe them or not; they don’t know what this would mean. Jesus listens patiently to their account of the events of Holy Week. 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 the disciples 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 two disciples unable to recognize their traveling companion? 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 him. However, I am at a loss to understand why Jesus would disguise himself or why he would reappear in a different form.

There is, however, 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 taken down from the cross and 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, later that evening, they sit at table with Jesus, sharing a meal together just as they shared a meal with their Lord three days earlier, 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 are able to see deeper; we are able to experience Jesus' presence. Then we know the true meaning of Easter!

Note that the disciples, who are walking the lonely road to Emmaus, 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 fail to 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 the disciples 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, their discovery, their deeper revelation, the disciples, like Mary, realize that they cannot hold onto this new and different experience of their Lord. As soon as they recognize Jesus, he vanishes! They later encounter him in other ways and places. The eternal Christ is now no longer limited by his human form, 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? Where 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 the beauty of nature. We can experience him in prayer. We can experience him in the love that we both receive and share with others. 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 fail to see what is right before our eyes. And if we do not look with our heart as well as our eyes, we will miss the deeper revelation of God's presence in our lives and in the world.

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, through the eyes of faith, we realize that God loves us. Out of this realization, we 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 welcome the social outcast into our lives and into our church. We 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 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 of Jesus' death and resurrection 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!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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(An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.)