

Jesus through the Eyes of Faith
Jeremiah 31:1-6
John 20:1-18

“She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.”

On this glad and holy morning when we greet one another with the words, “He is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” I suspect most of us in this sanctuary are saying more than we know. I think this because, on every other morning of our lives, what we know involves being able to see and hear and touch and test the object of our knowing. But when we say, “He is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” we are speaking as those who can only know and see him who was raised from the dead *by faith*. Now lest you think faith involves believing, with the White Queen of *Alice through the Looking Glass*, six impossible things before breakfast, let us agree that faith has nothing to do with believing even one impossible thing. Faith is a relationship of trust. It is the gift of a meeting,” Karl Barth says, “in which [we] are free to hear the word... God has spoken in Jesus Christ in such a way that, in spite of all that contradicts it, [we] may once for all, exclusively and entirely, hold to [God’s] promise and guidance.” To see Jesus through the eyes of faith is to put all your trust in the love that death cannot end.

For the last five Sundays in the season of Lent, we have attempted to see and know Jesus through the eyes of various characters in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the blind man, Martha and her sister Mary, Caiaphas and Pilate. All of these saw Jesus as we see one another right now: saw him as an embodied human being whom they could hear and touch and hold. Mary Magdalene had seen him in this way as well. We first meet her in John’s Gospel standing near Jesus’ cross with Jesus’ mother Mary and his mother’s sister. On Friday afternoon, the three Marys see Jesus, the one whom they have loved in life, as an embodied human being, a human being about to breathe his last.

Many of us have seen the same. “A friend of ours is dying,” Catholic priest and theologian Hans Urs von Balthazar says at the beginning of his Easter sermon to a radio audience in Germany many decades ago. “We visit [her]; we watch [her] becoming weaker and weaker; we hear [her] final words and exhortations...; we see the no longer intelligible movements of [her] lips; we are privileged to be present, embarrassed and weary, at this sacrament in which [she leaves this world]... We go home and crawl around like disoriented... beings whose present is submerged in the past and to whom the future blows as down a drafty pipe.”

When we finally begin to crawl out of the clutches of grief, we may say that we see her still in the imaginations of our hearts, see his touch upon the earth in what he has left behind, see their life in our life well lived. But of what Mary saw early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, we know nothing except for the tangible things she saw: the grave stone rolled away, the body presumably stolen, the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth rolled up in a place by itself. All these sorts of things we can know in the way we are used to knowing things, even though we do not know what they mean any more than Mary did.

Seeing these same things led the disciple whom Jesus loved to believe, John says. Now belief in John’s Gospel is a verb and basically means an active commitment to Jesus. You could say that what the beloved disciple saw of the grave and the grave clothes was sufficient to send him back to the world as a follower of his living Lord. I know people like this, people who read the Bible or hear an Easter sermon and respond with a trust that takes my breath away. Yet John also adds of both Peter and the beloved disciple that “they did not yet understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead,” leaving me to wonder what it was about what *they* saw that led John to say they believed. They certainly did not see Jesus—only evidence that he was no longer in the grave. Jesus will say later that night to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” No doubt this was John’s word to his own community, some sixty years after Easter morning. But I think I am right in saying, some two thousand years after Easter morning, such trust in things unseen eludes more of us than not.

I think that is why Mary is the central character in John’s narrative. Believing did not come easily to her. Rather Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, seeing only the absence of him whom she had loved in life and had now lost to death. Again, it is where you have stood, where all of us will stand who have loved another fiercely and can no longer see him or touch her or hold them. Love, Scottish preacher John Baillie wrote, “cries out for continuance and fulfillment,” and yet our human longing is no match for death’s finality. Add to her grief the insult of his missing body. Even his so-called remains are gone, no vestige of his actual existence, “no place that is not empty of him. The powers of darkness have not only killed him,” Paul Duke writes, “they have wiped out all traces of him,” which is to say, death also had

Mary in its clutches. Mary was convinced that death had had the last word over Jesus' life. She is the only character in all four Gospels who weeps on Easter morning.

"Mary's weeping," Duke says, "is a testament to the darkness and opens a crucial door for our facing of it." Two angels, marking Jesus' absence as they sit at the head and foot of his tomb, do not announce his resurrection but ask after the reason for her weeping. The first words spoken by the risen Christ are "Woman, why are you weeping?" He wants to know the meaning of her tears. Some say her tears keep her from seeing when she glances in the tomb or is questioned by the angels or thinks Jesus is a gardener. But what if her tears of inconsolable grief, the grief of one facing the reality of a relationship ended by death, are the prelude to seeing Jesus through the eyes of faith? Unlike the disciples who viewed the evidence and were off, Mary remains, looking death in the face as Paul looked death in the face and called it the last enemy. The sweet lies that the culture tells—death as a beautiful transition, death as the release of the soul to some disembodied Never Neverland—is absent from Mary's seeing of things. Death has ended the relationship in which she had put her whole trust. Now she stands stripped of all things, made vulnerable by her grief. Yet, says Kristine Culp in her own wrestling with the story, to remain vulnerable is not only to be susceptible to unfathomable tragedy; it is also to be susceptible to transformation. Jesus appears not first to those whose minds have closed around certainty but to the one whose heart has been broken by a grief that is the other side of love.

Why are you weeping, Jesus asks us on this joyous Easter morning when we have come to celebrate? Why, we ask ourselves, when we stand on tiptoe singing "Jesus Christ is risen today!" do tears begin to fall uninvited? We are weeping, we say, because death has left us to dwell in the absence: the absence of those we can no longer see or touch or hold, the absence of relationships ended this year in the melee of politics, the absence that is the aftermath of divorce, the absence of peace as death rains from the skies, the absence of a future in the face of disease, the absence of God in any way that we can see or touch or taste or hold. Yet on that first Easter morning, Jesus addresses the one whose grief is because of him and unbearable without him, whose vulnerability is the prelude to faith.

"Mary," he says. Only that. Mary. He who was dead and is alive calls the name of the one who grieves, who remains at the tomb weeping. Tony. Alice Lea. Barbara. Sandy, Graeme. Knud. Mike. Howie. Suzan. Rob. Hope. Becky. Ann. Dolores. Mary Ann. Jack. Jim. Ken. Jane. Joan. Craig. Pricilla. Sylvia. Elvis. Don, Jesus says. In John's Gospel, this is the moment when the resurrection is declared, when the last word death spoke on Friday is eternally countered by the word love speaks on Sunday. This is the moment when the relationship Mary thought had come to an end now becomes the relationship that will transform the rest her life and the life of the world. This is the moment when Mary turns and sees Jesus through the eyes of faith, through the gift of a meeting in which she becomes free to hear her name spoken by her living Lord and, in spite of all that contradicts it, once for all, exclusively and entirely, holds to his promise and guidance.

His promise is that he has prepared a place for those whom you love in the love that knows no end, the love that never quits, the love that has conquered death. His promise, in spite of all that contradicts it, is also that death will never again have the power to hold you or any of God's creatures in its grip because love and not the grave is your destination too. His promise is that nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature will ever again be able to separate you from the love of God you know in him. Far from being over, her relationship with Jesus has just begun, a relationship, Peter Marty says, that will be like talking with someone "who does not provide an answer to our every want, but who offers strength for our every need." Therefore, in spite of all that contradicts this, Mary now runs and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

"Although you have not seen him, you love him," a disciple of Peter writes to Christians in Rome about the same time John is writing his Gospel. "Love," my dying friend Robert Jenson says, "is shorthand for a narrative: death and resurrection." He says, "Love points not so much to something inside each of us as to something between us." Easter is the gift of a meeting with him who was dead and is alive for evermore, a meeting in which we become free to hear the lover who calls our name, who bids us welcome, who sends improbable us running to tell the world God so loved, in spite of all that contradicts the news: "He is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" Alleluia!