

I Have Seen the Lord

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 11, 1993.
Scripture Lessons: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Dr. Rudolph, my college English professor, entered the classroom, his shoulders slumped as though carrying an invisible weight of sorrow and grief. It was the first day of Fall classes. Several weeks before, his 18 year old son had his life stolen by an illness which had sapped his strength for a year. He looked at the class with watery brown eyes, fumbling as he placed three frayed English books on his desk. He began to speak in a low hoarse voice filled with emotion.

"I have a sinne of feare," Dr. Rudolph said. I recognized immediately that he was quoting a poem written by the 17th century poet, John Donne.

I have a sinne of feare
That when I have spunne
My last thread,
I shall perish on the shore.

Dr. Rudolph sighed. And then this man whom I knew to be an intellectual and spiritual giant of deep Christian character and conviction confessed, "I have a fear that there is nothing after we die; that my son Zeke is gone forever."

There was a long silence. No one in the classroom dared breathe. I think everyone felt acute embarrassment for him in the presence of his grief. I think the whole class felt, as well, confused and fearful about Dr. Rudolph's uncertainty. After all, I'd gone to Wheaton College because it was a Christian school where Christian doctrines were affirmed in no uncertain terms and buttressed with sound learning. But Dr. Rudolph stood there with tears in his eyes and said, "I've lost my son. Zeke is gone. And I fear that there's nothing after we die and my son, Zeke, is gone forever."

And then he said, "I would like to pray." We bowed our heads and he called out to the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. That day I learned not only something about the poetry of John Donne, I learned something of what real faith in the resurrection is. Real faith is not wishful thinking. Real faith doesn't pretend there are no problems. Real faith calls out to God even in the dark and through tears.

Early on Sunday morning Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb of Jesus. But when she got there, the stone was rolled back and the tomb was empty. It didn't occur to her that this was something God had done. She assumed that grave robbers had taken the body of Jesus to be used in pagan rites. Grave robbing was common enough in those days to provoke an imperial edict against it. She ran back to the city to tell her friends. Peter and John ran to check out her story and returned leaving Mary standing there weeping.

"They have taken my Lord and I know not where they have laid him," she sobbed. "Jesus is gone forever." She was filled with an inconsolable longing to be united once more with One she loved but feared she would never see gain. St. Luke tells us in his Gospel that Mary Magdalene was one of a number of women disciples from whom Jesus had cast out evil spirits. In fact, Luke tells us that Jesus cast out seven demons from her. I don't presume to know exactly what that means. I don't know how her malady would have been explained today. I certainly don't hold to the Enlightenment view that cavalierly dismisses demons merely as pre-scientific descriptions of emotional disorders.

I don't know exactly what she had suffered, but it must have been a terrible

condition. William Styron, the writer, described his descent into the madness of depression in an article entitled, Darkness Visible. "I felt an immense and aching solitude (and hopelessness)," he wrote. Maybe this is what Jesus had delivered Mary from - the demons of hopelessness, shame, guilt, depression, sorrow, discouragement and despair. He replaced those demons with his spirit and gave her the conviction of her own worth before God and other people. He gave her joy that she'd never known before. But now she'd lost him. The demons were returning. The darkness was returning. It's an awful thing to feel that your very existence is not just broken, but broken beyond repair. That, I'm sure, is how Mary felt.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence for the reality of the resurrection of Jesus is the change that took place in Mary and in countless other men and women throughout the ages. Easter began in darkness and with tears but concluded with Mary's irrefutable testimony, "I have seen the Lord."

This is how it happened.

"Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' 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."

Did you hear that? She saw the Risen Christ. ~~She spoke to him.~~ She wanted to be close to Jesus. She had come seeking Jesus. But she didn't know that it was Jesus. It wasn't easy for the early Christians to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. None of them were really expecting him to rise again. It's easy to believe that someone has died. It's terribly difficult, if not humanly impossible, for anybody

to believe that God can raise the dead. Real faith in the resurrection never comes easily. It didn't come easily for Mary. It didn't come easily for any of the disciples. It doesn't come easily for most Christians.

When I was diagnosed as having cancer three years ago I didn't know if I'd be alive in six months. My head was telling me, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" but in my heart I was saying,

I have a sinne of feare
That when I have spunne
My last thread,
I shall perish on the shore.

In my fear and anxiety, I did not feel in my heart the presence of the Risen Christ, nevertheless I cried out in faith to him in prayer and he heard.

Today, the immediate threat of my death by cancer is remote (I hope) but, still, too many people I care about hurt too much to let believing come easy. People close to me get cancer and die too soon; my prayers don't take away the pain or hold back the tolling of the bells. My friends' marriages turn into battlefields and their children go through a hundred kinds of mini-hells. And when I see those starving children in Somalia dying and the oppressed people I pray for keep getting their heads banged and their freedoms choked I cry out, "Where are you Lord?" (Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong*). But even though real faith in the resurrection is never easy God can enable us to recognize the presence of the Risen Christ despite the darkness and the tears we experience.

That's what happened to Mary Magdalene.

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means

Teacher).”

One of the first recorded words of the Risen Christ is a woman’s name. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who calls his own sheep by name. No one spoke her name as he spoke it. It was Jesus – the man she’d lost – lost she thought, for ever. When Mary heard the Risen Christ call her by name she came ~~not only to see the Risen Christ objectively, but~~ to feel his presence and know in her heart that Jesus was alive and that everything was going to be all right.

There are Christians living today who, like Mary Magdalene, have heard the Risen Christ call them by name. The Risen Christ dispelled their darkness and dried their tears. For some, they waited long before it happened, but happen it did. Down through the centuries Christ’s followers have borne the same witness. “Jesus Christ came to me last night,” says Samuel Rutherford in his jail cell in Aberdeen, Scotland, “and every stone glowed like a ruby.” “Christ is alive, as alive as I am myself,” cries Dr. Dale of Birmingham in England as the reality of the risen Lord comes to him. “He comes to us,” wrote Albert Schweitzer, “as he came to them by the Lakeside; and he speaks to us the same word, Follow me!”

But how do we get ears to hear the Risen Christ speaking to us personally as he did to Mary Magdlene? Let me quote a rather long passage from the life of Helen Keller which suggests to me how this takes place. Helen Keller, as you know, became blind and deaf at a very early age through an illness. Despite the difficulties she faced, the loving concern of her teacher, Annie Sullivan, ^{ed} open the eyes and ears of her spirit. Helen Keller wrote,

One day while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled d-o-

I-I and tried to make me understand that d-o-l-l applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words m-u-g and w-a-t-e-r. Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that m-u-g is mug and that w-a-t-e-r is water, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment or tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed.

She brought me my hat and we walked down the path to the well house. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word 'water', first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt misty consciousness as of something forgotten - a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. Everything had a name. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done."

I imagine that describes something of ^{what} Mary Magdalene felt when she heard the Risen Christ call out her name. The Risen Christ, ^{is} like Annie Sullivan, ^{He} patiently and lovingly works with us even when we cannot recognize or understand what he is doing. ^{He will not give up even when we are intransigent, He accepts us even when we push him away. He is present even when we don't recognize him.} But when, like Helen Keller, we awaken to our encounter with him, as one day I believe we all ^{may} ~~will~~, we hear his voice, see and feel his presence, and embrace him in heart felt love. Then we too will say, "I have seen the Lord."

That's the goal of the Easter faith; to ^{like Mary} ~~feel~~ that ^{Jesus loves me even} ~~in love~~ while everything about me says I'm unlovable; to ^{Do Risen Christ also make} ~~feel~~ that life ^{is} worth living; to ^{That Jesus is (came) me.} ~~feel~~ gratitude; to ^{going to be all} ~~feel~~ delight and joy in the presence of the Lord and to know that all is ^{going wrong;} ~~right~~ ^{with} me even when everything around me is ^{the pits;} ~~right~~; to ^I ~~feel~~ that in life and in death we belong to the Risen Christ, our faithful Savior. That is the goal of our Easter faith.

Let us pray: Almighty, loving God, we praise you on this Easter morning. Living Jesus Christ, come into each of our hearts and give us eternal life through what you have done. For your name's sake. Amen.