

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Jonna Bohigian

April 21, 2019
John 20:1-18

I Have Seen the Lord!

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Happy Easter everyone! The day we've been waiting for has finally arrived. The Easter eggs are dyed, the baskets are ready, the ham is ready for the oven, and family celebrations are about to ensue. You've put on your Easter best, and your kids' outfits aren't scuffed up yet. Congratulations, you've made it! A warm welcome to our special guests this morning!

When I was growing up, Easter was one of my favorite days of the year. The dressing up and the egg hunts were a lot of fun, and the worship services were beautiful, but my favorite part was waking up earlier than I ever did, getting dressed up in the darkness of the early morning, and going with my dad to an Easter sunrise service.

No one else in my family would ever want to go, which was a *bonus*. I could have my dad all to myself. I felt really special. Sometimes, I was even given a job to do, like turning the musician's pages or helping my dad practice his sermon in the car. I felt like I carried a secret with me, having already celebrated the resurrection of Jesus before most people were even *awake*, and getting that time with dad that no one knew they were missing. It was the best!

Easter is all about *relationships*, and John 20 captures this better than any other Gospel. This story is typically read at Easter sunrise services because it begins in the darkness, but this text is so special, that I don't want us to miss out on it!

Mary Magdalene had a special relationship with Jesus. She had been oppressed by seven demons, and Jesus healed her. She had been set free! In response to her freedom, she became his disciple and funded his ministry. She devoted her entire *life* to Jesus. She traveled with him and his disciples from town to town, and she followed him all the way to the cross. When he had been abandoned by all of his disciples but a few, Mary remained faithful. She loved Jesus more than anything.

She had been faithful. She had been there. And then he died and was placed in a tomb.

He was laid in the tomb. The One who had healed her, the One to whom she had dedicated her life, was *dead*. She left in darkness to mourn. There was nothing more to be done. She would need to stay away for one whole day because of the Sabbath, but she would be back as soon as she could the following morning. The One she loved had died, but if she could be near his body, that would be better than being away.

Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it is still dark, Mary goes to the tomb. It is difficult to see, but she can see well enough to notice that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Someone has stolen Jesus' body! Mary immediately goes running to tell two of his closest disciples.

They run to the tomb, and see only the linen and head cloth that covered Jesus' body. The head cloth is folded, which is *not* something a tomb raider would take the time to do in a hurry! The disciples can put two and two together; his body has *not* been stolen. But they don't say anything. They leave, and Mary remains.

She finally has the courage to look inside the tomb, and she is met by two angels! She doesn't seem surprised *or* scared, but she continues to cry. "'Woman, why are you weeping?'" they ask (Jn 20:13a). She replies, "'They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him'" (Jn 20:13b). Mary wants to know *where* his body has been taken so that she can go to be where he is.

She turns around and she sees Jesus. But Mary does not know that it's Jesus. She has been so filled with sorrow, that she can't recognize the *very one* she's been looking for! He speaks to her. "'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?'" (Jn 20:15a). She thinks he's the gardener, so she demands that if he's the one who's taken the one she's been looking for, he must tell her where he's taken him, because she'll take him back.

Mary is *bold*! She wants Jesus' body back, and she will do *whatever* it takes!

Jesus then speaks the one word Mary has heard her entire life. "Mary."

In that moment, she *knows*. She knows that this man is no gardener; he is the One to whom she has dedicated her life! He is the One for whom she has risked *everything* – her finances, her reputation, her very life! He is the One she wants to be with, dead or alive.

In that moment, the very moment he calls her name, *everything* changes! She turns, and in that moment, “history too, [moves] almost imperceptibly from B.C. to A.D. A second *before* this turn there is a woman in the deepest human despair in the agonizing presence of unconquerable death; a second *after* the beginning of this turn, there is a woman in the deepest possible human elation – in the presence of the death-conquering Central Figure of history.”¹

She hears, she *sees* the One to whom she has given her life! “Teacher!” she yells. She wants to hold onto him indefinitely! Who *wouldn’t* want to hold onto someone they love who has risen from the dead? She doesn’t want to let him go, but *Jesus* has a mission, and he has a mission for *her*.

Jesus needs to ascend to the Father, and *she* is the one to tell his disciples. Though his disciples denied him and abandoned him in Jesus’ hour of greatest need, he calls them “brothers.” Their cowardice and lack of faithfulness do not disqualify them from Jesus’ love. He has forgiven them. And because of his death on the cross, they are now his *brothers* and are *sons of God*.

Mary brings this message to the disciples and says, “I have seen the Lord!” (Jn 20:18b).

How amazing, that Jesus *honors* Mary’s faithfulness and love by appearing first to her and then by giving her the most important news in history! He trusts her to share the news that he is risen! He is no longer dead! Death has *not* defeated him, and he will live forever!

This story of Jesus’ resurrection is really unbelievable. This story is unbelievable, not simply because resurrections are so few and far between, but because Jesus chose to reveal himself first to a *woman*. If Jesus was concerned about establishing the greatest credibility for his resurrection, he *should* have appeared first to men, particularly to men in power. He should *not* have entrusted this important

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 1152.

message to a woman, whose witness was not valid in court. If nothing else, he *should* have encouraged his disciples to write that *men* were the first witnesses. But no, Jesus appeared *first* to a woman, and Jesus' disciples and those who shared this story were so unconcerned about creating a case for Jesus' resurrection, that they told it like it was. A *woman* was the first witness to Jesus' resurrection. *She* saw the Lord!

That Jesus would care to honor a woman with the most important news of history demonstrates Jesus' incredible particularity. Jesus *cared* to honor the one who faithfully remained with him to the end. He *cared* to honor his disciples who had been with him for years, even though they had abandoned him. He *cared* to honor his mother, who would lose her child, by giving her a new son. He *cared* to honor every single person who ridiculed him, mocked him, and wrongfully accused him, by crying out on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). He *cared* to honor all of humanity by coming to earth and dying on the cross. And he *cares* to honor *you* by dying for *you*.

His death on the cross took place 2,000 years ago, but his death was for *you*. Jesus died to defeat the power of the devil in your life. He died to make you right with God. He died and rose again, so that death would *not* be the final word, and that you might live forever with God.

Know that nothing you have done and nothing you do will be able to separate you from God's love. You were created by God and loved by Him, but because of your sin, you needed someone to make you right with God. You could not make yourself right with God nor could anyone else, but a perfect Person could make you right with God. So before you were even born, Jesus was born and died for you, so that you could be made right with God and live forever with Him.

Maybe you've heard this message before, and you simply don't believe it. It seems too far removed from you. You don't see how someone's death 2,000 years ago could mean anything for you. I would like to encourage you to come back next week, to get to know the many people here whose lives have been changed in dramatic ways by Jesus. I encourage you to come for Alpha, to bring your

challenges and your questions, to speak openly about where you're at. Our goal is to honor you and the journey you're on. You are not pressured or coerced to engage in a conversation with us, but we sure invite you! We trust that since God created you and loves you, that He is speaking and working uniquely in your life, whether you recognize it or not. And He will continue to invite you, to call you to Himself and will not push.

My mother-in-law, Becky, had long had a difficult relationship with *her* mother-in-law, Jean. I never met Jean, but from what I'm told, Jean was as dramatic and complicated a person there ever was. She seemed to be hopelessly selfish, even as her husband was placed on hospice care.

The family had all been there in the room with him. Everyone left but Becky and Jean, who stayed for a bit longer. It was getting late and they were needing rest, so Becky asked the hospice nurse if there was time. The hospice nurse said to go home.

About two hours later, Becky received a phone call from the hospice nurse. "It won't be much longer. You need to get down here quickly to see him before he passes," the nurse said.

Becky and Jean quickly got ready and drove to his hospice home. Becky says that when Jean saw her husband, laboring to breathe, Jean became a different person. It was a transcendent moment. When Jean saw him, she flew to his bed and crawled in. She tried to wrap his arms around her but she couldn't, so she asked Becky to help her. She snuggled in and recited the 23rd Psalm and sang "Amazing Grace."

As Becky observed this moment, she knew that it was pure gift. Jean would soon be back to her usual ways, but for this brief moment in time, she became the best version of herself. She became as unguarded as a little child and cared for someone in the unique and particular way they needed to be cared for.

You are cared for and loved in a unique and particular way. For as long as you live, God will continue to invite you into a relationship with Him, and will show you who He is, until you too will say, "I have seen the Lord!" Jesus died and is risen indeed for *you*! Amen.