

I Have Seen The Lord

John 20:1-18

April 16, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

In the past few weeks we have been looking, in the Gospel of John, at encounters people had with Jesus. Important encounters. There was the encounter Nicodemus had with Jesus. The lesson there is we must be born from above...born anew...born again. Then there was the encounter at Jacob's well Jesus had with a Samaritan woman. Jesus is living water. We turn to Jesus and are born anew, and we will never thirst. Then came the encounter between Jesus and a man born blind. Our most powerful witness as followers of Jesus—as people who have been born anew—is we were once blind and lost, but now we see and are found. Lazarus, together with his sisters Martha and Mary, had an encounter with Jesus. Jesus is our resurrection and life. There's kind of a progression to these encounters. From being born anew to never thirsting to our witness to our eternal life...

So we come to today. Mary had an encounter with Jesus. In Scripture there are many women named Mary. We are talking about Mary Magdalene here...or Mary of Magdala. I would say this was and is a significant encounter. Her encounter was with Jesus just outside the tomb where, three days earlier, Jesus had been buried.

Let me say a few words about Mary Magdalene. We will come back to this. We can read in the eighth chapter of Luke's Gospel that Jesus traveled from one city and village to another, proclaiming the good news. The twelve apostles were with him. And so were some women. Among them was Mary Magdalene. She followed Jesus. She is

mentioned at least twelve times in the Gospels. That's more mentions than a few of the apostles. Most mentions of her are found in the accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection. All four Gospels say she went to the tomb. Two of them make it quite clear that Jesus appeared first to her. One more fact about Mary of Magdala. Jesus cast seven demons out of her. As I said, we'll come back to this.

Anyway, back to the empty tomb. We all know how the Easter story ends...right? Amen? He is risen! He is risen, indeed! That's how the story ends. And so we know how the story will end for us. We win! Everything will be okay. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Because Jesus conquered the grave, we are victorious over death. Because he lives, we live. Amen? We know how it all ends...because this is not our first Easter. I can tell you that this is the thirty-eighth Easter sermon I have preached. It will end the same. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive. Praise God that truth has not and will never change.

But go back some twenty centuries. It was the first day of the week...the day after the Jewish Sabbath. It was early. In fact, it was still dark. Given that a Jewish day ended at 6:00 PM, and the new day started right after that...well, Mary could have been walking to that tomb in the middle of the night. Mary was walking to a tomb. She was walking to the place where someone she loved had been buried. What Mary was feeling that day was not the joy of resurrection and eternal life. Hers was a feeling of despair and defeat. She was walking to a grave.

As Mary approached the tomb, she saw the first small sign of a great victory. The story says that Mary saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. She did not understand the meaning. She missed the first sign of victory. She jumped to the conclusion that someone had taken Jesus' body. She was indignant. She ran to Peter and John. We believe John was that other disciple.

The two of them ran to the tomb. They ran. John was swifter. He reached the tomb first. They looked inside. What did they see? They saw evidence that the body of Jesus had not been taken. They saw evidence that he had risen. The strips of linen were still there. If he'd been taken, wouldn't he have been taken...linens and all? Or if the grave robbers had removed the linens, wouldn't they have just left them in a pile on the ground? But the linens were just lying there. In other words, it looked like they had not been touched or disturbed in any way. The cloth that had been around Jesus' head was folded up by itself. Jesus just rose up out of those linens.

They saw this, and they believed. They began to believe. They did not understand, but they began to believe.

Here is lesson one for us this day. Do you ever just look around sometimes at the stuff happening in the world...and just kind of shake your head? You know...we believe and all that...but we shake our heads...because we just don't understand? We don't understand why there is an explosion in a church or a shooting in a school. Those are just a couple of things. I shake my head. I say to myself and others, "I just don't understand this stuff. I don't get it." You have that experience every now and then? Doubts arise in so many people.

But we still believe. We believe because the resurrection assures us that we win. This world and what is happening in it is not the end. Whatever happens...listen! That is not the final word. The empty tomb...that is the last word. And it is a good word!

I can just picture Peter and John standing outside that tomb. They were in the

throes of grief. They had witnessed some bad stuff...the worst of tragedies. So they stood there and shook their heads. They said to each other, "I just don't understand this. But I believe." They went back to their homes.

Mary had also returned to the tomb. She was weeping. She looked into the tomb. She had that brief conversation with a couple of angels. Then she saw Jesus standing outside the tomb. She did not realize at first that it was Jesus. Remember, it could still have been dark. She was crying. Tears can blur our vision. And she was not expecting to see Jesus. About all she knew at that point was Jesus was dead, and someone took his body. It was logical for her to assume that this man standing before her was a gardener. We know from the end of chapter nineteen that this tomb was in a garden. She had that very brief conversation with the person she thought was the gardener. Then Jesus uttered her name. "Mary." And then Mary knew. When Jesus addressed her as "woman", she did not know. But when he called her by name, then she knew.

And here is a second lesson for us this day. The resurrection teaches us.... Well, Mary's first encounter with Jesus—her first encounter with Jesus after his death and resurrection—was at the tomb. "Of course it was," you say. Yes it was. It was in her moment of deep grief and despair...in a moment when she felt defeated. It was in that moment when she may have wondered what she was going to do next. It was that moment when she may have been struggling to understand and believe. That was when she experienced Jesus and victory.

In our struggles, Jesus is so very present. He is right there. Look through the tears and darkness, and gaze upon him. Listen for his voice. Listen for Jesus to call us by name and claim us as his.

Mary heard Jesus call her name. I mentioned that this was her first experience with Jesus after his death and resurrection. But this was not her first encounter with Jesus...no, not at all. She had heard Jesus call her name

before. This was Mary Magdalene. Remember what was said about her earlier. She had a somewhat questionable past. There was the deal about being possessed by demons...demons plural...seven of them. We are talking about evil here. Jesus cast those demons out of her. Jesus delivered her from evil. This should give us some insight as to why Mary was so devoted to Jesus...why she was one of the first to visit the grave. Jesus began a new work in her life. I'm thinking that was a pretty cool experience for her to hear Jesus calling her by name at the tomb.

When it gets tough...when we are struggling to believe...struggling to hold on...struggling with whatever...just listen. Jesus is so very present. He is present because he is risen! He is risen, indeed. Mary was the first to give witness. "I have seen the Lord," she said. Mary, with her questionable past with evil and all that.... She appears to be the first one Jesus named and claimed after he triumphed over sin and death.

Hear this! No matter how messed up and scarred your past might seem to you...or even your present...Jesus did something. At the cross, he defeated sin...not just some sin, but all sin...your sin and my sin. And at the grave he conquered death. And he offers you new life this day. Because he lives, we live. He calls us by name, and he claims us as his own. See him and believe.

Praise God the story ends the same. In the midst of life, Jesus names us. We are his. We serve a risen Savior. We must tell the world we have seen the Lord.

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