

# *I Have Seen*

John 20:1-18

April 1, 2018—Easter Sunday

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.*

So...this is the forty-first Easter sermon I have preached. Forty-one Easter sermons. For most of those Easter sermons, I have used this passage from John as the text. Of the four resurrection accounts, this is my favorite. This is the tenth Easter sermon I have preached here. Ten. For nine of those messages, I have used this text from John. Back in 2015, I used Mark's resurrection story. I have no idea what I was thinking then.

You know...all of those Easter sermons...all forty-one of them...the message has pretty much been the same. The story has always ended the same. He is risen! Today I am giving thanks that in the midst of change...in a world where...well, in a world where there is so much uncertainty...there is one thing that has not and never will change...this is one certainty...one truth that is constant. The cross worked...and the tomb is empty. Let me repeat that. The cross worked...and the tomb is empty. Jesus is alive!

I believe with all my heart that Jesus rose from the dead. I believe the stone was no longer covering the entrance to the tomb because Jesus exited the tomb. Tombs were not usually open because someone walked out of it...but because someone was about to be placed in it. This wasn't the case that first Easter morning. Now Jesus could have left the tomb without the stone being rolled away. We read later in this twentieth chapter of John's Gospel that Jesus was able to enter a room without benefit of an open door. Jesus could do that kind of thing. The stone being rolled away was a sign to those who came to the place.

So consider the story one more time.

It was early. It was dark. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Mary Magdalene is the one person mentioned in all four of the resurrection accounts. We do know from the other reports that there were other women who also went to the tomb. Mary went there to anoint the body of Jesus. We know that Mary witnessed Joseph of Arimathea placing Jesus' body in the tomb. It was close to the Sabbath when Jesus died and was buried. The Sabbath was a day of rest. So the body of Jesus could not be given a proper anointing with spices and perfume. That's why Mary went as early as she could after the Sabbath. The body of Jesus needed a proper anointing.

As I mentioned in March's newsletter, we know from Mark's account that Mary's biggest concern as she walked to the tomb was a concern about who would roll away the stone...because it was a heavy stone. Well, Mary arrived at the tomb only to discover that the stone had already been rolled away. Her first thought was not, "Praise God; Jesus is alive!" Nope. She thought someone stole the body. She ran and told Peter and the other disciple...who was John. They went and saw for themselves.

Let me insert this little tidbit of information here. It was women who first witnessed the empty tomb. It was women who first gave testimony about the empty tomb. This is not an insignificant detail. In first century Palestine the testimony of a woman was not considered credible in and of itself. In fact, the testimony of a woman—even eyewitness testimony—was not considered valid unless it was corroborated by at least one man. That was then. The four Gospel writers did not hesitate to say it was Mary who gave the initial testimony. Her testimony is to be believed. That tomb was empty.

Mary went back to the tomb. Jesus made his first resurrection appearance to her. She did not recognize him at first. She thought he was the gardener. Remember...it was dark. She was crying. She wasn't expecting to see Jesus. Jesus called her name, and she knew it was him. She then went to the disciples and told them she had seen the Lord.

So Mary was the first to report the tomb was empty. She was also the first to report that Jesus was alive.

So today is Easter Sunday. You know what else today is? It is April fools' day. The last time Easter fell on the first day of April was in 1956. It'll not coincide with April fools' day again until 2029. Easter is not on a set date. The spring equinox and the moon phase come into play in setting the date for Easter. No need to get into that now. There is also a quirk or two in the Gregorian calendar. So it just works out this way.

Remember that I said this is my forty-first Easter sermon. The message is usually the same. Jesus is alive. Because he lives, we live. Praise God. But this is the only one of those forty-one Easter sermons that I have the privilege of preaching on this date. Being as how Easter will not fall on the first day of April again until 2029...well, this is it...the only Easter sermon I get to preach on April fools' day.

I just cannot let that pass. That's what could make this one a little different. I hope you have learned these last ten years that I like to laugh. I've not often taken myself too seriously. I take what I do very seriously...but not me. I like to be around people who like to have a good time and who like to laugh...who are not so serious all the time. I think people who like to laugh—even when the joke is on them—are good people...even more trustworthy at some level. That is a personal opinion. What is the best April fools' joke you have ever been a part of...either as the recipient or the perpetrator?

You all pulled one on me once. Remember? The last time Sunday was on April first...not Easter Sunday, but just a regular

Sunday. It was back in 2012. Come to think of it, April fools' day was on Palm Sunday that year. Anyway, there is this notion about me that I like to be prepared...and to have things flow nicely according to my preparations. Surprises and last minute additions can sometimes throw me off a bit. For those of you who are into Myers-Briggs personality typing, I am a very high J on their scale. Keep things moving. Stay on task. Don't waste time. Just relaxing and going with the flow—wherever the flow takes us—is not the strongest part of who I am...unless I am floating along with a fishing rod in my hand. So on that Sunday in 2012, after all the prepared announcements had been made, I asked if there were any additional announcements...and every one of you raised your hand. Oh my...it did throw me off for a second or two. Good one. Someone planned that well.

There has always been one I wanted to pull on a congregation. Sunday, April first. I step up to the pulpit here and I put a whole ream of paper on top of the pulpit...five hundred sheets of paper. Then I put a lunch bucket on top of the pulpit...and next to the lunch bucket I put a thermos of coffee...and I look out at you and open the sermon with the words, "Okay folks, sit back and relax. Today we are going to attempt to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records." (For those of you who don't quite get that, I would be intimating that the world's longest sermon is about to be preached.) I'd like to see Terry Keese write a haiku on that sermon.

Okay...so what has this lengthy rabbit trail got to do with Easter and all that? Well, I wanted to do something a little different...this possibly being my final one and all that. But there is also this.... I like a good joke...a good practical joke. But there has never been a joke that changed my life...never a joke after which I said, "Wow! I will never be the same. That was life changing." Not one.

Almost from day one there was this plan to pass off the resurrection as some big joke perpetrated by the disciples...an elaborate hoax...a story to hide the truth. In Matthew's Gospel we read that the guards—the soldiers—at the tomb told the Jewish religious leaders—the

chief priests and the elders—what had happened. The guards admitted that the tomb was empty. They knew this meant big trouble for them.

So the chief priests and the elders knew the truth. But they gave those guards a large sum of money and told them to say that Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole the body while they were asleep. They told the guards that if the report of the empty tomb reached the Roman governor, they—the religious leaders—would defend the guards. The soldiers took the money and said what they were told to say.

You see the holes in that story? Like...if they were asleep, how would they know it was the disciples who took the body? Anyway, Matthew's Gospel says, "And this story has been widely circulated...to this very day."

A hoax. A big joke. April fools.

This is no joke. The disciples were Jews. The first followers of Jesus were Jews. The resurrection changed them. It changed the way they practiced their faith. They did not offer sacrifices...they observed and celebrated the one sacrifice. They started meeting on Sunday...the day of resurrection. They were not ashamed to give witness to Jesus. They testified in the face of fierce opposition. They even suffered themselves. They stopped being so concerned about proper religious practice. They desired to grow in a relationship with Jesus. It is no joke. It was life changing.

Listen...this is not just some religious thing we are doing here. Easter...resurrection...this is not merely some event for which we gather once a year...and sing the songs we sing once a year...and say the things we say...and leave saying, "That was nice." Jesus is alive. If this does not change us, then what are we even celebrating...and why? We serve a risen Savior and what we do today is not a religious ritual. Our risen Savior does not extend to us the invitation to become more religious. Jesus invites us to enter into a relationship with him...and grow in that relationship...and leave an old life...and enter into a new life...and become new people.

He is risen! He is risen, indeed! No fooling. See Jesus and be changed.

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