

*I Have Seen the Lord*  
**A Sermon on John 20:1-18**  
**Easter Sunday**  
**April 21, 2019**

**Introduction**

The good news on Easter Sunday is that Christ is risen, but it is more than that. The resurrection takes place off stage in all four gospels. The authors focus on our response to the resurrection.

In the Gospel of John, we see the reaction of two model disciples, the Beloved Disciple and Mary, and how they recognized Jesus. Mary's encounter with Jesus is the most emotional. It is one of the most dramatic scenes in all of literature. John's Easter story has become the preferred gospel reading every Easter Sunday because of this beautiful encounter between Jesus and Mary.

The Gospel of John also has a unique understanding of what the resurrection is all about. The resurrection is part of the glorification of Jesus, which begins with the crucifixion and culminates with the ascension. The ascension of Christ, even more than the resurrection, is the good news in the Gospel of John.

**First Move: Responding to the Empty Tomb**

John's story begins with the empty tomb. It takes place early in the morning, while it is still dark, on Easter Sunday.

All four Easter stories in the gospels say on Sunday instead of on the third day. Very early in Christian tradition, Sunday came to be a holy day of the week in addition to the Sabbath. Sunday was honored as the Lord's Day. It is a day of worship that is centered on the Resurrection.

Mary comes to the tomb in darkness, symbolic of her lack of understanding. The stone has been taken away, not rolled away as in the Synoptics.

When Mary is confronted by an empty tomb, she has a rational response. She believes that the body of Jesus has been stolen from the tomb. It does not occur to her that Jesus could be resurrected. Grave robbing was common in the first century. Bodies were not buried in graves; they were laid in tombs. A tomb is similar to a cave with shelves on the walls. The bodies were wrapped in grave clothes, like mummies, and laid on the shelves.

Women were responsible for caring for the dead and preserving memories of them. Women often had meals in the tombs to honor the dead. They would sit in a circle, read Scripture and pray for the dead person. They would tell stories about the dead person. Early Christians held worship services in the tombs on the Lord's Day. Scholars believe that some of our traditions about the Last Supper may have originated with women disciples who had funeral dinners in the tombs in honor of Jesus. Mary Magdalene may have originated and preserved some of these traditions about the Last Supper.

Mary runs and reports the missing body to Peter, who was the leader of the Disciples, and to the Beloved Disciple.

The Beloved Disciple appears only in the Gospel of John. He may have been the leader of John's community. He is called the disciple whom Jesus loved. He lays his head on Jesus' breast while reclining at a meal during the Farewell Discourse. He is one of the witnesses to the Crucifixion, standing near the cross with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus. Jesus sees them and says to his mother, "Behold, your son." To the Beloved Disciple, he says, "Behold, your mother." In John Chapter 21, when Jesus appears to the disciples while they are fishing in Galilee, the disciple whom Jesus loved is the first one to recognize Jesus. At the end of the Gospel of John, the author claims to be the Beloved Disciple.

The tradition recognizes Peter as an important witness to the Resurrection. John adds the Beloved Disciple as a witness. Nowhere else in the tradition do we see the Beloved Disciples as a witness.

The author takes two whole verses to describe a foot race between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Mary called it Footrace to Jesus on Easter a few years ago when she preached on this text. "And the two were running together, and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first."

John is not describing a rivalry between the Beloved Disciple and Peter. Peter is an important witness to the empty tomb, and John preserves that witness. John is glorifying the Beloved Disciple without denigrating Peter.

The Beloved Disciple bends over and looks in. Apparently you had to crawl to get into this tomb. Mary was unwilling to crawl while it was dark. The Beloved Disciple looks in and sees the linen cloths that covered Jesus' dead body, lying there.

Peter arrives and rushes into the tomb. Peter in the gospels is always described as the impetuous disciple, one who has courage to act. The author does not record Peter's response. Peter apparently is still in the dark.

The Beloved Disciple follows Peter into the tomb. The Beloved Disciple sees only the grave clothes and an empty tomb. The gospel describes his reaction simply

and beautifully: he saw and believed. The Beloved Disciple looks at the world through the lens of love instead of through a rational lens, which is really a cultural lens, however the culture conditions us to understand what we are seeing.

John doesn't explain what he saw and believed. He tells us that his faith in the resurrection was not yet complete. "For they did not yet know the scripture that it was necessary for him to rise up from the dead."

The Beloved Disciple knows that the body has not been stolen. This is the disciple that Jesus loved because the disciple is filled with love. His love colors the way he looks at the world. It allows him to detect the presence of Christ. The Gospel of John does not have Passion Predictions like the other gospels. Jesus has said only that he will be lifted up. The Beloved Disciple apparently believes that Jesus has gone to be with God. That is what Jesus has told them is eternal life, being with God. The Beloved Disciple believes that Jesus has eternal life and that he will share eternal life with his disciples.

The Beloved Disciple and Peter go away and return to where they had been staying in Jerusalem, apparently without speaking to Mary.

## **Second Move: Recognizing the Risen Christ**

The focus turns to Mary. Mary is left alone, standing at the tomb, weeping. The text mentions four times that Mary is weeping, perhaps out of grief that the body has been taken. Three times she mentions that the body has been taken from the tomb.

She bends over the tomb and looks in. Now there are two angels in the tomb. They are sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head, the other at the foot. The angels also are important witnesses. The authors of the gospels apparently were trying to refute reports that the tomb was empty because the disciples had taken the body of Jesus from the tomb.

The presence of the angels doesn't inspire fear in Mary as in the Gospel of Mark. The angels ask her why she is weeping. "They took away my lord, and I do not know where they placed him." She still believes that Jesus's body has been stolen.

Then Mary turns and sees Jesus, standing beside her. She does not recognize him. Her vision is clouded by her assumption that Jesus' body has been taken. Mary thinks he is the gardener. In the Gospel of John the tomb is located near a garden. Jesus' appearance may have changed somehow—he is in transition to becoming a heavenly being.

Jesus asks her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" He also asks, "Who or what are you searching for?" These are Jesus' first words in Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John. Jesus sees two of the disciples of John the Baptist following

him and he says, “Who or what are you searching for?” The question is addressed to the disciples, but it is addressed to us, too. What are you searching for when you decide to follow Jesus? What you are looking for shapes what you will see. Will you be open to new experiences in following Jesus, or will you be seeking to conform your experiences with Jesus to cultural expectations?

Mary is hopeful that the gardener knows where Jesus is. “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you placed him, and I will take him.”

Then comes the magic moment. Jesus calls her by name, *Μαριάμ*, in Greek. The good shepherd knows all his sheep by name and they come when they hear him call. I believe that we are seeing Mary through a cultural lens when we reduce her to Jesus’ lover. The text never says that. Why can’t we recognize her as a disciple of Jesus and let it go at that? Are romantic relationships the only deep relationships that women are capable of? Mary doesn’t call Jesus “darling” or “sweetheart.” She says, “Rabbouni,” which is how Rabbi is pronounced in Aramaic. Mary stills thinks of Jesus as her Rabbi and not as the risen Christ.

Jesus tells her that the old relationships have been changed. “Do not hold me for I have not yet ascended to the father.” Mary mistakenly assumes that Jesus is ready to resume his earthly ministry and continue to have a physical relationship with his followers.

The good news that Jesus proclaims is not just that he is risen but that he is ascending to the Father. The permanent gift of the spirit comes only after Jesus ascends to the Father. The incarnation, Jesus’ earthly ministry, lasted somewhere between one and three years. The permanent nature of his presence is the spirit. The spirit is the incarnation within us. Jesus says in the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 that it is the spirit that gives life.

Jesus tells Mary to go to his brothers and tell them that he is ascending “to my father and your father, to my God and your god.” This is the first time that Jesus refers to the disciples as his brothers in the Gospel of John. The ascension gives Jesus a new identity. He is not only the Logos, he is the Son of God, who has gone to live with God. Son of God has a different meaning in the Gospel of John. It is not a royal title--Jesus is the son of God not Caesar--it is a sign of a new family. Jesus shares this new identity with the disciples. All who believe in Jesus are now children of God. Contemporary theologies often say that all people are children of God. The Gospel of John takes a step in this direction. It says that those who believe that Jesus was sent by God and that he has returned to God are children of God.

Mary Magdalene runs and announces the good news to the disciples. “I have seen the Lord.” Jesus commissions Mary to be the first apostle, and she is an apostle

to the apostles. This is the first Christian sermon. It is the same good news that has been proclaimed every Sunday ever since. And the preacher is a woman, again upsetting cultural expectations. She saw and believed and announced. Your social station does not prohibit you from becoming an apostle—only the basic conviction that Christ has made us a place for us with God.

### **Third Move: Sharing Eternal Life with God**

Robert Kysar, a Professor Emeritus of Preaching and New Testament at Emory University, points out that Jesus appears only to those who had a prior relationship with him. Only those who expressed faith that Jesus was sent to us by God are able to recognize the risen Christ. The resurrection is not a public show that is intended as a display of power that wins converts. The resurrection is the continuing and the deepening of a relationship that has already been established. Easter is a celebration of the community of faith.

A deepening relationship with God brings surprises. One of the few things on which all four gospels agree in their Easter stories is that a woman or a group of women were the first to find the tomb empty. Kysar says that this shows that women were not confined to preconceived roles in the early church.

If Jesus is a true reflection of God, then he is beyond our understanding. He is more than we are looking for. We are surprised with what we find.

Jesus is not a liberal or a conservative. Our cultural expectations want to reduce Jesus to one or the other. Jesus is both and beyond both. If we describe Jesus as a liberal or a conservative, then our political ideology is our God.

Jesus is not a mainline Christian or an evangelical Christian. He is the leader of both movements and he is beyond both. Mainline Christians and evangelicals embrace different aspects of the tradition.

John has a different portrait of Jesus from the other Gospels. Jesus is described as the Logos who was at the side of God during creation. He descended from heaven and walked with us during the incarnation. Faith in John means faith that Jesus has been sent by God. At the end of the gospel Jesus returns to his heavenly home.

Jesus is in command on the cross in John's story. It is the moment that he is raised up and revealed to be a king. It is his glorification. He Jesus says, "I am thirsty," to fulfill scripture. After he drinks, he says, "It is finished." Then he bows his head and relinquishes his spirit to God. Jesus is more divine and more Greek than in the other gospels.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus suffers in Gethsemane and on the cross. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Jesus is most human in Mark. That has made Mark the darling of New Testament scholars.

These are very different portraits of Jesus Which one is right? Do we blend them together? Think of the gospels as a prism in which each offers a different angle of Jesus. Each witnesses to a different truth about Jesus.

What is unique in the Gospel of John is that Jesus gives us eternal life right now when we believe in Jesus. The Greek expression is *αἰώνιος ζωή*. *αἰώνιος* is where our word *aeon* comes from. An aeon can mean a long time, which could be translated eternal. An aeon can also mean an age in history. John intends for it to carry both meanings: eternal life with God and new life right now.

The resurrection and ascension means that humiliation and shame on a cross are not the final word for Jesus. God raises Jesus and brings him home to enjoy eternal life with God.

God shares eternal life with us through our relationship with Jesus. Life with God means knowing God and being fully known by God. Jesus opens us up to the sacred all around us.

If we are shut off from God, or the sacred, we are dead already. We close our eyes to the wonder of creation. We fail to see the threads that weave us all together as sisters and brothers. We become self-absorbed and focus on ourselves and our own little circle of family and friends.

Knowing God gives our lives meaning. That is the struggle for middle-class Americans. We have all the stuff we need. We wish we had more and we wish we didn't have to work so hard, but all our basic material needs are taken care of. Our quest is a quest for meaning. So much of what we see around us seems trivial and profane. We're looking for what really matters. We're looking to connect with something that is real and enduring.

It's hard to recognize what is real. The disciples walked with Jesus, but they had a hard time at first recognizing him after Easter. The disciples in Luke's Emmaus story didn't recognize Jesus until they broke bread with him. Mary Magdalene didn't recognize Jesus until he called her name. She knew him through the word.

The Word is in the Bible but it is more than the Bible. It's hard sometimes to recognize the word of God and distinguish it from the word of man. We encounter the Word when we hear the Bible and find something enduring in it, when it brings us closer to God.

When we know God, we try to look at the world as God sees the world, as it really is. That is truth. Truth is not some supernatural force that exists outside of the

world and remains unchanging for all time. Truth is reality, describing things as they really are.

A good guideline for discerning the word of God is that it tends to take us to a place we wouldn't go on our own. The word of God should sound a little strange to us. It leads us to notice the marginalized people in the world, immigrants, people of color, gays and lesbians, prisoners on death row, children with disabilities, and trying to look at the world from their perspective. We try to understand how their reality is different from ours and how it is similar to ours. We try to see them as God sees them. Being connected to God means that we are connected to them.

## **Conclusion**

The miracle of Easter Sunday is not just bringing a dead body to life. The miracle is that our lives are transformed by this new life. Death on a cross is not the last word for Jesus. Life with God is the last word, and Jesus shares this life with us.

That is the quest of our lives: to know God and to be known by God. Then we can join with our sisters and brothers and say, "I have seen the Lord."

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