

## Easter Day, 2015

### John 20:1-18

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But 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. 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). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

I have a confession to make: I often experience Easter as somewhat of a let-down. You see, for me as a priest, Lent is always intense, and brings a lot of extra duties, extra work. When we arrive at Holy Week, there is, for any preacher, the challenging task of interpreting the meaning of Jesus' tragic and seemingly senseless betrayal, trial, torture, and death – a task which, for me, always takes days of study, prayer, and sermon-writing. It is all very emotionally and physically draining.

Come Easter, though, and all of that is behind me. I can let out a long sigh; but *with* that sigh, it also feels like a good deal of air has been let out of my spiritual balloon.

Professor N.T. Wright made me realize a big reason that Easter is a letdown for me – and maybe for you. Dr. Wright says, “Many people in our culture, including many Christians, think of Easter basically as a happy ending after the horror and shame of Good Friday: ‘Oh, that’s all right, he came back to life, well, sort of, and so he’s in heaven now so that’s all OK, isn’t it?’” (from a sermon at the Easter Vigil, 2010)

Let’s admit it: hasn’t each of us thought that? It’s as though on Ash Wednesday, we start reading the dramatic story of Jesus’ life and

ministry, then in Holy Week we get into the tense and agonizing part of the story – and *that* part takes up **lots** of pages in the book. Then comes Easter, and the story is finished. Close the book, THE END.

Yesterday, though, I read a meditation in one of the emails sent as part of our Lenten Study, “The God We Can Know” (by John Mogabgab). The author mentions that remarkable verse from Isaiah, where God says to the people of Israel, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Then the author remarks, “These words contain the promise of Good Friday and the challenge of Easter.”

The *promise* of Good Friday and the **challenge** of Easter. But I had always thought that Good Friday was the *challenge*, not the **promise**; and Easter was Jesus’ successful victory *over* Good Friday’s challenge, and brought with it the **promise** of new life. To think of Good Friday as the *promise* and Easter as the *challenge* was a totally new perspective for me. Suddenly, Easter was not the *end* of the **story**, but the *beginning* of the **challenge**.

What are Easter’s challenges? We could probably think of dozens of them; but today I want to mention one: the challenge of recognition.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, but she does not recognize him.

Now, throughout Jesus' ministry, Mary Magdalene seems to have been one of his closest followers. Whether or not you believe the theories about a romantic relationship with Jesus (theories popularized by *The Da Vinci Code*), there is no doubt that she was connected to him at a deep spiritual and personal level. I think she probably understood the direction that Jesus' life and teaching were going better than most of the other disciples. What she did **not** comprehend, the teaching of Jesus which had *not* sunk in, was the part about dying and rising again; and in that, she was not alone. For none of his disciples seem to have understood. And in other post-resurrection appearances of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, many of Jesus' other close followers do not recognize him, either. Why is this?

Professor David Lose writes: "One of the common elements of the resurrection stories across the gospels is that *no* one **expects** the resurrection. Even though Jesus predicted his death... and resurrection... several times across his ministry, no one [in the Gospel stories] greets the news that God has raised Jesus from the grave and defeated death and the devil by saying, 'Praise God!' No one shouts 'Hallelujah' when they hear that their friend and Lord has been raised to life. And absolutely no one, upon hearing the news that death itself

could not hold the Lord of Glory captive, says, ‘I knew it – just like he said!’ ...**No** one *expects* resurrection...” (“Dear Working Preacher,” March 24, 2013)

And it is so often true that we see what we *expect* to see.

When Mary Magdalene comes to Jesus’ tomb early that first Easter morning, she is looking for his dead body. Perhaps she needs to grieve and weep over the body; perhaps she needs to see the corpse in order to accept that he is really gone, to come to some kind of closure. But whatever the reason, she is so focused on her desire to see Jesus’ shroud-wrapped body that she cannot recognize him when he appears to her alive.

Part of the problem, I am sure, is that she didn’t understand what Jesus meant when he said, after entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24) And who can blame Mary for not understanding? “As Anna Carter Florence says... if the dead don’t *stay* dead, what **can** you count on?” (*ibid.*) Despite the many times that Jesus said, “Those who lose their life, will gain it,” despite his raising Lazarus from the dead, and despite all those times he predicted his own resurrection, neither Mary

or any of the other disciples seems to “get it”, to accept the Paschal Mystery, the truth built into the very DNA of the universe (as we mentioned Friday night): life comes from death. We are alive today because the sun is constantly burning itself up, dying that we might live. We are alive today because plants and animals have died that we might have food to live. We are *here* today because Jesus died that we might have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

But rarely does the life which comes forth from death appear identical to what it looks like *before* it dies. The new life that comes forth from that grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies isn't another grain of wheat, but a whole wheat plant, green and leafy! What comes forth from a caterpillar's cocoon looks nothing like the caterpillar. What comes forth from Jesus' tomb is not the identical Jesus who was crucified and buried. This resurrected Christ can walk through walls and vanish in an instant. If we are looking only with the eyes of the flesh, we will likely miss the risen Lord. He will look like a gardener, or a stranger walking along the road to Emmaus.

Cynthia Bourgeault believes that the risen Christ *chose* not to look identical to the earthly Jesus in order to *train* his disciples how to see him in different guises, in different contexts, in different places. And to do that, they would have to remove whatever barriers there were in themselves to recognizing his presence among them. Dr. Bourgeault

writes: “In these instances where there is difficulty recognizing him, Jesus is in fact holding the mirror before his friends to show them what stands in their way, what they will have to look at and work through in themselves in order to be able to see him through the light of their own hearts. Indeed, this seems actually to be the main purpose of his sojourn among them (for those 40 days before his Ascension). He has to take them through this drama of recognition yet one more time so that they will know beyond a shadow of doubt how to find him from the inside, how to recognize him hereafter and in all times and places when his fleshly appearance becomes yet more subtle.” (*The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008, Kindle Edition, p. 129)

How do we recognize our risen Lord in the stranger, the prisoner, that person of a different religion or ethnicity or sexual orientation? How do we recognize him in our own child, or spouse, or parent? How do we recognize him in our enemy? How do we recognize him in ourselves? It’s a recognition that comes from the heart, and the Risen Christ is teaching Mary Magdalene and his other disciples to whom he appeared how to see from that place inside. And it involves teaching them to let go of their expectations; to let go of the stories we all continually tell ourselves about our lives and this world, and let our risen Christ re-tell the story from his own perspective of self-emptying love, replacing our story with his.

The risen Lord touches that heart-space in Mary when, after she mistakes him for the gardener, he calls her by name. But even then, in the Gospel story, she appears to want to touch him. “Do not cling to me,” Jesus responds.

How many of **our** problems in growing spiritually are caused by wanting to cling to our old perspectives, our old prejudices, our old habits, our old way of doing and perceiving things? “Only when [Mary Magdalene’s] perspective shifted did [the risen Lord] come into view.” (*ibid.*, p. 130) And shift it does, for our Gospel lesson ends with Mary telling the other disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

This, at least in part, is our Easter challenge: to recognize Christ in all those places where we don’t expect him, where we don’t expect God to be made flesh in some other guise. And to do so, we need to continue to train the eye of our heart to see, letting go of what it is in our yesterdays that we cling to, whatever keeps us from seeing from within.

How do we train the eye of our heart? Simply trying to become more aware is a wonderful place to start! Gaze at the beauty of the Easter lilies! Breathe in their fragrance, and the fragrance of today’s



incense! Truly listen to the sound of singing and the organ, listen for the words of the Scriptures, the hymns, the prayers. Look deep into the eyes of your child, your spouse, your dog, your cat, and open your heart to what you see.

Spend time in silence. Spend time in prayer, gently letting go of all the loud jumble of thoughts that is the constant background of our minds.

For Easter does not come only one day a year; nor does it always come with loud shouts and processions. Often – *quite* often, in fact – it comes quietly and with great subtlety.

So here is the Easter challenge: Will we recognize our risen Lord when he comes in these unexpected places, unexpected people, at unexpected times? In gazing at a flower in the window, can we hear it whisper, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!”?

AMEN