

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. Easter Sunday March 23, 2008 St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Durham, NC John 20:1-18

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! We are blessed to gather together this Easter morning with so many family, friends, and visitors. We are blessed to have traveled from Maundy Thursday in the dark and anguished garden of Gethsemane to Good Friday and the horror of the cross to Holy Saturday and the quiet of the tomb to Easter and Christ's triumph over death. We celebrate Christ's resurrection each and every Sunday, but on this Easter Sunday we are blessed to witness the resurrection through scripture. As we hear John's Gospel account, we walk with Mary Magdalene in the dark to the tomb. We share in her astonishment that the body of Jesus is gone. With Mary, we meet the risen Jesus but do not recognize him at first. With Mary, we seek to embrace him only to discover that he is different than before. With Mary, we are sent to deliver good news to his brothers and sisters. And as she speaks, we realize that the good news is not simply that Jesus has risen from the dead. The good news is that through the resurrection we, with Mary, have seen the Lord. We have come to faith. We have seen and believed. Or have we?

Throughout the Gospel according to John, we find an emphasis on the importance of seeing and believing. John's Gospel is filled with imagery of darkness and light, blindness and sight. Those who truly see Jesus find themselves drawn into belief, caught up in faith. And so it is very intentional that John begins the story of Mary of Magda's discovery of the empty tomb by telling us that "it was still dark." It was still dark in the sense that it was before dawn, but it was also still dark in the sense that Mary and the other disciples had not yet seen and believed. Jesus had told them that they would see him again. He had told them he was resurrection and life, but this truth had not dispelled the foggy darkness of Mary's mind and heart. She comes to the tomb to mourn not to celebrate a risen Savior. It was still dark. Upon seeing the stone rolled away she runs to fetch Peter and another disciple known only as the one whom Jesus loved. She runs not to deliver good news but to sound an alarm. When Peter and the beloved disciple arrive, they do not see either, at first. Even though they peer into the tomb by the dim light of the early morning, it is still dark in terms of their ability to see and believe that Jesus is risen.

Is it still dark where you are? How's the light? Have you seen the Lord? Have you believed in the risen Christ? The problem for many of the characters in John's Gospel is the same problem for many of us today. It is still dark. In John's Gospel, either you see or you don't. Either you get it or you don't, kind of like appreciating a joke. Have you heard the one about how many Episcopalians it takes to screw in a light bulb? It takes 3, one to actually screw in the light bulb, one to pour the drinks, and one to talk about how great the old light bulb was. You see, at least some of you get it. But the joke is not funny to someone who has never heard of the Episcopal church, who does not know our tendency to enjoy a tasty beverage and our eccentric attachment to old traditions. Sometimes it seems like the resurrection is similar. Either we get it or we don't. Either we see and believe or we feel...left out. Many of us find the resurrection as the proof that Jesus was Lord and Savior of all. Something about that event has touched our hearts, has opened our eyes, has awakened our faith, has given us hope. Some of us, though, find the resurrection a stumbling block. It does not make sense. It is too strange, too unbelievable. Or maybe we accept it, but our hearts are not moved. We want to believe that Jesus' death and resurrection had some saving effect on us, but we just don't feel it. So what do we do if we don't feel it this Easter? What do we do if it still feels dark? Or if we do see, if we do have faith, what do we say to our brothers and sisters who are struggling to find faith? What can we offer our friends and neighbors who do not see the resurrection as life changing, powerful good news?

Based on today's Gospel reading, we can say this: "faith happens." You've seen the bumper stickers

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and t-shirts that talk about something else happening...a four-letter word that I won't repeat here happening? You know what I mean? _____ happens? “_____ happens” characterizes the grim and tragic news we see each and every day in the headlines. Well we have a different headline this morning: faith happens! Faith happens, and that is cause for hope. In today's Gospel reading, the resurrection is good news, but the other good news is that because of the resurrection, the Beloved Disciple and Mary of Magda (or Mary Magdalene as we call her) see and believe. Faith happens. The light comes on, and they get it. For the beloved disciple, who is supposed to be a sort of model for those of us who are reading this Gospel according to John, he does not even have to see Jesus. Something breaks through in that moment in the empty tomb when he looks at the abandoned death linens. The text tells us that he saw and believed. What did he believe? He believed not just that a miracle had occurred, not just that a dead man was alive again. I think what John means to convey is that this beloved disciple finally believes who Jesus is. He finally gets what Jesus has been saying all along. “The Messiah, the one called Christ...I am he,” Jesus said to the Samaritan woman. “I am the bread of life,” he said to the crowds who had been fed by a miracle. “I am the light of the world,” he spoke to the Pharisees who did not want to see. “I am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.” “I am the way and the truth and life,” he says to his disciples. “I am the vine, you are branches.” he says to them the night before he died on the cross. “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says to Martha right before he raises her brother Lazarus from the dead. I am. I am. I am. I am. Jesus repeats it over and over again. And here in the tomb, the beloved disciple finally believes that Jesus is and God is, and they are connected, and we're all connected too, and that connection is stronger than death. Faith happens, and he believes.

That Beloved Disciple goes home, but Mary stays at the tomb weeping. All she can believe is her own tears. All she can believe is the tragedy of this world. All she can believe is _____ happens. In the world we live in, it is so easy to believe in tragedy. But as she cries, Mary peeks into the tomb and sees two angels there. And the scene is kind of comical. “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask as if to say, “Hey lady, don't you see what's going on here?” And then, Jesus appears and says the same thing, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” as if to say, “Hey, it's me!” Mary still does not get it, but when he calls her name, “Mary!” the blinders come off just a little bit. She sees that it is Jesus, but she addresses him as “rabbi.” To her, he is still the teacher, still the miracle worker from Galilee, still the same old Jesus, but does she understand that he is so much more? Jesus corrects her by saying, “do not hold on to me, do not hold on to me with those old ideas about who I am, because I have not yet ascended.” He's telling her that he is more than a teacher, more than a man. He tells her to go and announce to his brothers and sisters that he is going to the Father, his Father and her Father, THE Father (and Mother), the God of us all. Mary goes and announces the good news, “I have seen the Lord.” That's the good news, “I have seen the Lord.” Finally Mary gets it. She hasn't just laid eyes on the Lord, she's SEEN the Lord. She gets it. Faith has happened to her. She believes that Jesus is Lord, not just a teacher. She believes that he is going to God, that he comes from God and that she, too, is part of that relationship.

Faith happens to the beloved disciple. Faith happens to Mary. Their conversions are good news for us. Of course, the Resurrection itself is good news. But just as good is the news that Mary and the beloved disciple come to believe in who Jesus Christ is. Just as good is the news that Jesus calls us his brothers and sisters and that as he makes the journey to heaven, he makes that journey to draw the whole world to himself, so that faith happens to us too. I find it interesting that John, the writer of the Gospel, decided not to name the “beloved disciple,” the one whom Jesus loved. I think it is partly because he

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wanted those who heard his account to insert their own name, to identify with this one that Jesus loved. We are all beloved disciples, and therefore, faith can happen to us. For some of us faith happened a long time ago. For some of us, faith is still happening. For some of us, we wonder if it will ever happen. Whether we see or whether we are still stumbling around in the darkness (and I think we often do some of both), we can proclaim this good news at Easter: faith happens. In spite of a crucifixion, faith happens. In spite of all the horrible, tragic things we do to each other, faith happens. Because of resurrection, faith happens. Because death is not the final word, faith happens. We come to see and believe that God and Jesus Christ and all of us are related, and our relationship is stronger than death. Through the resurrection we are formed into a family of faith. We are a faith family now and forever, and whether each one of us feels like family or not, whether each one of us gets it or not, faith is happening and that is cause for Easter celebration.

Faith family, Easter begins today but it lasts 50 days, and I invite all of us to consider how we will use the next seven weeks to celebrate the resurrection and the faith that happens among us. Fellow beloved disciples, I invite us to consider how we will share the good news that we have a relationship that is larger than life and deeper than death, a connection that transcends tragedy and heralds hope, a family with God, with Christ, and with each other that is confirmed in the resurrection. We can see and believe in this family. We can see and believe in these relationships. My brothers and sisters, Christ is risen. Beloved disciples, faith is happening. Thanks be to God. Alleluia.