

Can You See the Lord?

John 20: 1-18

Matthew 25: 31-40

From our prior weeks' studies in John's gospel, we know that John emphasized the perceptual problems of the disciples and others around Jesus, and their inability to see and recognize Jesus as the Promised One from God, as Messiah, as Savior. Maybe a teacher, prophet, healer? Yes, those are the understandings that get repeated in John, but not Promised One, Savior, Son of God. As we've seen through our Lenten scripture selections, from Nicodemus visiting Jesus in the dark, to the healing of the blind man, to the variety of misperceptions at the raising of Lazarus, to last Sunday's confusion at Jesus' entry to Jerusalem together with Judas's betrayal, the recognition of just who Jesus is remains stubbornly problematic.

Having used the literary archetype contrasting light and dark as well as the archetype of seeing versus blindness, John combines *both* archetypes for his Easter morning account. John sets the scene with Mary **in the dark**.

Only in John, Mary goes **alone** to the tomb. We have no explanation why. In Matthew and Luke, there is anointing being undertaken, a rather odd thing to do on the *third* day. Without explanation, we can imagine the listener, the audience, knows exactly why Mary went to the tomb alone early in the morning of the third day, so perhaps her early morning activity doesn't need explanation.

Mary arrives and is shocked to find the stone covering has been rolled away. She runs back to tell the others. She had seen enough to know that Jesus wasn't in there. However, did she look closely? Did she see what she might have needed to see? Hmm.

Mary's surprising news prompted Peter and a disciple referred to only in John as "the beloved disciple" to run to the tomb. Mary wasn't likely far behind, but for now she has dropped from the action.

The focus has shifted to the two disciples arriving at the tomb. The "beloved disciple" looks in and sees the tomb is empty, while Peter goes right inside, seeing the burial clothes but no body, no corpse. Then the "beloved disciple" enters as well. The presence of grave clothes left behind indicated that it wasn't grave robbery; they wouldn't have taken the time or effort to remove the clothes.

In a confusing sequence, the text says: *he* [the beloved disciple] *saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead*. What was it that the beloved disciple "saw and believed"? This disciple wasn't taught about resurrection and *then* came to believe. Rather, he was a witness to the resurrection and *then* believed. The text does not say the same realization occurred to Peter or to Mary. Uh-oh.

So far, we have Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple all having seen inside the tomb at some point, with the guys having actually gone inside, and no one has actually **seen** anything or anyone.

The guys, being guys, figure, “Duh, well, that’s that!” and they go back home. Mary is there apparently, standing outside the tomb weeping. Why doesn’t Mary return with the guys? There is a rabbinic teaching from that era which states that the third day after a death is the time when the greatest grief and mourning should be expressed for the deceased. The visible grieving and mourning is nothing with which the men would have been involved; that was a woman’s role.

She bends over to get a good look inside while she’s doing her grieving, and two angels are seated within. The guys didn’t see the angels? But Mary does? This happens in all four gospels, not something that happens too often. The angels challenge Mary about her grieving; *Why are you crying?* The angels are confused that she is grieving with no dead body present. Mary expresses no surprise at angels being inside the tomb. Presumably her acts of grieving were sufficiently deep to have allowed individuals (or angels) to enter the tomb. She simply accepts *their* appearance, but yet cannot accept the disappearance of Jesus’ body. The perceptions of things are all way off the mark. It’s very confusing if you wanted the story to make any sense.

Mary tells them how the dead body is missing, having been removed apparently. There is no reply from the angelic occupants of the tomb whose role in the story has ended, having been oddly unhelpful and even unnecessary.

Still outside the tomb and looking in, Mary turned to find someone standing near her. He asks also, *Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you’re looking for?* She thinks he’s the gardener or caretaker or someone who might know something. Ah, he suggested the body, right? – *who are you looking for*. She asks where this person has taken the body so she can get it.

She has seen but not recognized the one speaking to her. When he calls her by name, “Mary,” she finally recognizes Jesus. While it is reminiscent of the resurrection story in Luke about the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus – they had Jesus walking with them, but only recognized him after the breaking of bread – we’ve come to expect the disciples’ failure in recognizing Jesus - seeing the person perhaps but not recognizing Jesus in that person. The disciples routinely fail in all four gospels to comprehend Jesus’ being, his sonship, and his special mission as the Promised One from God to advance the Kingdom.

He tells her not to hold onto him. It isn’t as though touching him was an issue; Jesus will invite Thomas to touch his body in just a few verses. It is a reminder that everything has changed. No, Jesus has not returned to resume his earthly ministry, to pick things up where they had left off. Jesus is telling her that everything *has* changed and things *won’t* be returning to the way they had been. The disciples need to start thinking in new ways and Mary needs to tell them so.

Mary then returns to the other disciples relating, *I have seen the Lord!* Again, the emphasis on seeing, recognizing, indeed **finally** understanding. Let's recall that when she first saw Jesus, she saw the gardener. When she says she has seen the Lord, she is not simply making a statement of evidence; it is now a profession of faith, a profession of a resurrection faith.

The resurrection faith sees and believes ... at last! The resurrection faith sees and believes that the power of the state to execute and end life cannot trump the complete sovereignty of God and God's promise of life. The resurrection faith sees and believes that human sinfulness is overcome by the gracious love of God. The resurrection faith sees and believes that death is defeated by the promise of life in Jesus Christ. The resurrection faith sees and believes that everything has changed and nothing is the same. The world and its powers no longer define the terms; the sovereignty of God has asserted new terms: justice over power, love over hate, equity over superiority and elitism, sharing over greed, caring over condemnation, compassion over indifference, forgiveness over judgment, freedom over bondage, and life over death.

But before we start singing "hallelujahs" and congratulating ourselves on our keen sense of sight, recognizing and proclaiming Jesus as our resurrected Savior, standing in the light, indeed basking in the promise of life, let's remember that we're disciples, too, hardly different from those who accompanied Jesus. Our sight is unlikely to be as keen as we imagine.

That brings us to our other passage where recognition of Jesus is fraught with problems of perception. In Jesus's Matthew 25 vision of the separating of the sheep and the goats in the last days, the disciples discover that Jesus is not where they imagined. They thought that surely they would find Jesus in the afterlife, with God in heaven, seated on the throne. Jesus helpfully reminds them that his presence remains with those who are of greatest concern in the Kingdom, who are of God's greatest concern.

Jesus informs his stunned audience that he has indeed been right here with them, although they may not have seen him as they imagined they would see him. Sound familiar? *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

Having so many accounts of the disciples' perception problems, and wanting simply to embrace that new life promise that is witnessed on Easter Sunday, we should rejoice at the resurrection and check our vision to make sure that we can see the Lord among us. He isn't somewhere in a beautiful place called heaven, sitting on a throne, waiting to welcome you to your eternal bliss when you die. Jesus is much closer, waiting for your witness to the resurrection, to the promise of new life for others who struggle.

In this time in particular, we should be reminded that when tragedy strikes, it is the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable who are most likely to be overcome by adversity

and who will experience the pain and suffering of current events far *more* and for far *longer* than those of us who are quite comfortable and well-supported.

Today we celebrate that Jesus is risen, that the promise of new life was fulfilled, that the love of God triumphed over the sinfulness of humanity and the attempts of worldly powers to challenge God who alone is sovereign. May we also form our faithful witness to the Lord, opening our eyes so that he may indeed be seen among us, expecting us to minister in his name. As we join in remembering the Lord's Supper, knowing that the Lord is made alive in us as his body and blood are shared with us, may we be strengthened by his spirit of compassion, his longing for justice, embracing his peace, healing, and new life for all.

Rejoice in the Lord who is revealed today *outside* an empty tomb, bringing to all who believe a new life that is sacred and transcendent, a witness to the Kingdom of grace, love, and new life. Praise the Lord and rejoice in the new life that comes to us today, new life that is to be shared every day.