

April 16, 2017

John 20: 1-18
Easter 1

Is it Real? Is it True?

It was Easter Sunday ... a day like today.
The season that year (like this one),
had been filled with activity and details.

And as with every Easter, and every Christmas,
with all the visitors
and all of the familiar faces,
I wondered ..

what could I say that could make a difference?
What could I say that hadn't been heard before?
What could I say that would be fresh and inviting,
clever, humorous, memorable?

Now, I've been preaching Easter sermons for a long time.
If you asked me though about any particular one of them,
I couldn't tell you anything distinctive;
same story,
same backdrop,
same beautifully decorated sanctuaries
with flowers and smiles
and cute kids
too full of chocolate and sugar.

No, looking back on dozens of Easter Sunday messages,
with as much time and study and pondering
as I put into each one...
not one of them remains a standout, etched into my memory...
except this one Sunday a dozen years ago.

I remember *that* Easter Sunday message
clearly and painfully.
It was *not* how I had pictured the sermon.
In all my preparation,
and practice,
and careful crafting of the message ...
this had not been part of my message.

And without even investigating,
 her mind went to a dark place:
someone(s) had rolled the stone away,
 and stolen Jesus' dead body.
 Why?
 How?
 When?
 Who?

Even later when she came back,
 and *did* go into the tomb,
 it still made no sense:
 two angels?
 talking to her?
 and she was talking back!

And even when Jesus himself came into view,
 it didn't fit her preconceived narrative:

Jesus had died.
 Jesus was buried in a tomb three days ago.
 Today the tomb has been breached,
 and Jesus' body has been taken away
 for God-knows-what...
 by God knows-whom...
 for God knows-why.

Even when Jesus spoke to her,
 Mary couldn't recognize him.

She thought he was a gardener.
 (Does that seem strange?
 Why would she think that?
 Did he have some distinctive kind of clothes?
 Was he carrying a hoe and rake?
 -funny art depictions abound-)

Could the explanation be as simple as
 they were IN a garden ...
 and perhaps Mary reasoned:
 who else would be in a garden
 at that time of morning,
 except the gardener?

Funny thing about gardens in this entire story:

1. Jesus had been praying in a **garden**...
2. Jesus was betrayed in a **garden**...
3. Jesus was arrested in a **garden**..
4. Jesus was buried in a **garden** ..
5. And Jesus was resurrected in a **garden** ..

I think the Gospel writer of this story, **John**,
is trying to get our attention with this **garden** image.

John does that:
he drops hints for us throughout his book,
like the bread crumbs that Hansel and Gretel
dropped so they could find their way
back home...

John wants us to find the Way as well.

John loves to show us things
in LIGHT and DARK...
as symbols for: understanding,
and *not* understanding.

- ~ Remember Nicodemus came to Jesus *by night*.
(He was having a hard time understanding Jesus)
- ~ Jesus finds the woman at the well at high noon
(she understood who he was right away)
- ~ And here Mary is coming to the tomb
while it is still dark
(she's still not understanding.. but on the verge).

The themes of Light and Dark...

And we have theme of the GARDEN:
Praying, betrayed, arrested,
crucified, buried, resurrected.

All in a garden at dawn (half light)

Hmmmm ... where else is there a prominent garden? (Eden!)

And how does John begin his gospel?

In the beginning was the Word,
 and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
² ***He was in the beginning*** with God. ³
All things came into being through him,
 and without him not one thing came into being.
 What has come into being ⁴ ***in him was life,*** ^[a]
 and ***the life was the LIGHT*** of all people.
⁵ ***The LIGHT shines in the DARKNESS,***
 and the ***DARKNESS*** did not overcome it.

(John 1)

And here we are back in a Garden once again ...
 only now it's not a garden of CREATION,
 but a garden of RE-CREATION.

The resurrection is re-creation!

Then and there Jesus speaks her name: *Mary!*
 And she knows. It is him.
 The sun is up ... she sees clearly now.

Did you ever wonder about the fact
 that the RISEN Jesus *only*
 appeared to those who knew him?
 Not a very good public relations plan to launch a movement.

As one of my favorite preachers Fred Craddock wrote:

"If I had been running it,
 I would have had (Jesus) go around to all stores,
 go back into Pilate's hall and say,
 "Hey Pontius, you want to give it another shot?"
 That's the way I would have run it."

So what happens next?
¹⁸ *Mary Magdalene went,*
telling the news to the disciples:
"I saw the Lord!"
And she told them everything he said to her.

No PR ploy.. no pleading with them to believe her...
 just a simple telling of what she knew now
 to be true for her: *"I saw the Lord."*

* * *

What is true for you?
 Whatever it is that YOU come to believe
 doesn't have to be rocket science.
 It's your experience ...

It's what rings true when you go home,
 and the Easter lily gasps its last breath
 and all the eggs have been found
 and it's time to think about taxes.

Mary simply told her truth; what she had seen and heard:
I have seen the Lord.

Oh oh.. there goes that pesky, clever John again...
 He's pointing something out to us.

Remember when Jesus first called his disciples?
 What did he say?
 What was the CALL to people to follow him?
Come and see!

So John has brought us come full circle!
 For Mary (now the disciple), can say:
I have SEEN the Lord.

What have *you* SEEN?
 What can you point to out of your own life
 and faith experience?

For me...

I have seen Jesus in our lobby on Thursday mornings
 as dozens of our unhoused neighbors come
 for breakfast,
 and to be served as honored guests
 with simple sandwiches,
 respect, and lots of hot coffee....

I have seen Jesus in the preparing and filling each week of
 30 backpacks for 30 children (and their families),
 from Chavez School
 to have enough food
 for the weekend....

I have seen Jesus each time we have an **InsideOut Sunday**
 where *everyone* comes together to serve
 those in our own community who need it the most:

~ whether that's with HIV Alliance picking up needles in the park
 or serving a hot and amazing lunch down at Occupy Medical
 ~ or packaging food at Food for Lane County ...
 ~ or our toddlers stuffing new socks full of soft foods
 for our homeless neighbors
 ~ or putting together lunch bags to hand out Mon-Fri here
 ~ or learning from our Muslim neighbors
 about their hopes and fears ..
 ~ or doing yard work for the elderly..

I have seen Jesus in our Raging Grannies,
 and Women-in-Black standing each week
 on the city sidewalk by the courthouse
 making their silent witness
 against war and violence...

I have seen Jesus in the courageous witness and protests
 and even arrests
 of our members standing up
 to corporations and systems
 that are destroying
 God's good creation
 and our planet...

And I have seen Jesus in all of you:
 how you live and work and play
 and care for each other,
 while also caring for the least.

I have seen Jesus show up in the most unexpected
 times and places ..
 pulling me out of my own clumsiness and preaching
 that Easter sermon some 12 years ago.

In retrospect, God's Spirit
 was in charge of the show that day...
not me.

In fact, I was decidedly **out** of control
 and panicking
 about what **to** do.

Like that first resurrection morning story
 we heard read earlier,
 all I could do was witness the event,
 and realize that I was part of something
 much larger than myself.

So here is how it happened:

I began my carefully prepared Easter sermon
 with the beginning explanation
 that I really had agonized about how to bring them
 a fresh and relevant Easter message about
 about resurrection...
 ... however...

And then it happened:

I was vaguely aware that something was not right..
 a few people were quietly moving to a certain pew
 and whispering as they huddled together.

Well at some point I could not at the same time
 keep trying to speak one thing
 while trying to figure out what was going on out there.

I went down to the pews, to find that one of our elders
 had slumped down, was unconscious.
 The doctor in our congregation
 said there was no pulse.

She shook her head, as if to say: *It's over.*

The EMTs had been called
 and they arrived amidst complete silence
 (though there were many prayers going on).
 The minutes ticked anxiously by,
 and finally they
 gently lifted him on the gurney.

It had been ten very long minutes.
Any thoughts of picking up with my sermon
went completely out the window.
We would just have to wait it out.

And then it happened.

He opened his eyes!

Yes, his heart had stopped.
Yes, there was no pulse.
And yet, now he was sitting up.

They took him to the hospital to be checked over,
but he was home by that evening
for a slightly delayed Easter dinner.

Is it true? Is it real?

I have seen Jesus.

And for me ... it is.

Amen.



Preached by the Rev. Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.