

April 4, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 25: 6-9; John 20: 1-18

Title: “We Have Seen the Lord”

It’s so good to see you this Easter morning as we celebrate the greatest event in human history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb! I hope you came here this morning ready to celebrate.

Ironically, on that first Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene came to Jesus’ tomb to do nothing like celebrate. She expected nothing but death and grief and painful memories. The surprise they experienced that morning changed their lives—and the course of human history.

Now what would you do if you came to a tomb and the dead person stepped out to greet you? I don’t know about you, but my first reaction would be panic. We know how to prepare for death. We know how to respond to it. But how do we prepare for the Resurrection? How do we prepare to meet the risen Lord?

Most of us have heard the story, especially John’s version, many times. The part that gets me every time is the part where the risen Christ appears to Mary and she thinks he’s the gardener. He softly calls her name, “Mary.” At that moment, there was, as someone described it, “a sunrise in Mary’s heart.”

Tradition has painted her to have been a woman of the streets. Whether this is so is a matter of speculation. What wasn’t speculation, however, was Mary’s devotion to Jesus. Later she would testify to his disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

So what does Mary Magdalene's experience on that first Easter Sunday have to do with your life and mine? Are there empty tombs in our lives into which we may be looking with a sense of helplessness and despair? It wouldn't be surprising. The loss of a loved one or other cause for grief is a universal experience. And so, it's a relevant question: is there a sense in which each of us can also come through a crisis of doubt and uncertainty and fear be able to say, "I have seen the Lord."

Let's note, first of all, the sense of hopelessness that enshrouded all those who followed Jesus after his crucifixion. If actions speak louder than words, those first disciples made it clear that they no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world. Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship for us but we can't appreciate the Easter message if we can't understand that the first Easter was born in total darkness.

His disciples had expected that Jesus was the one who would deliver Israel from Roman control but that hope was dashed as of Friday.

Perhaps you've been there. Maybe you've lived for a while behind closed doors. Many good people have. Grief, fear, hopelessness not to mention Covid. The two nights following Jesus' crucifixion were the longest nights that those who loved him would ever go through. Perhaps you've gone through something like that yourself. The words of a doctor, "I'm sorry, it's malignant. There's nothing we can do." A phone call in the night, "There has been an accident. Could you come to the hospital?" The words of your accountant, "If you sell your assets now, you might be

able to recoup part of your investment.” A parent to a young child: “You know, dear, Mommy and Daddy haven’t been getting along lately. We have decided to try living apart for a while.” Many of us have had our own dark nights. Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark.

But listen. **We need to know that help and hope are closer than we think.** The darkness of the moment and the tears in our eyes can blind us to a friend who’s standing in the shadows asking, “Woman, why are you weeping? Sir, why are you in such despair?” “Mary...or Jack, John, Cindy.” And we recognize that he’s been there all the time. He’s not dead, he’s alive! Christ is alive and because he is alive, we discover that the sun rises again, and birds sing, and joy will now begin to creep back into our lives. Easter reminds us that Jesus came to save us. Help and hope are a lot closer than we think. Our greatest ally in the long, dark night of the soul that many of us experience is our faith and our hope. “I am here,” he says, “I will never forsake you.”

And finally, **the victory of Easter is a gift available to anyone who will receive it.** As Christ was resurrected from the grave, so may you and I experience new life through him. That’s the gift he longs to give each of us. It’s the opportunity to experience victorious living here and now.

Comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert was just 10 years old when his father and two teenage brothers died in tragic plane crash. Colbert credits his

mother's faith and resilience with helping him cope with his grief. He says his mother's example of coping with her own grief kept him from giving in to bitterness. But for many years, he turned his back on his faith. After graduating college, he considered himself an atheist. But one day, while walking down the street in Chicago, a stranger handed him a small book containing the New Testament and Psalms. Inside the front cover was a list of verses to read if you were in need of help. Colbert flipped to the verses on anxiety. And as he read these verses, he says, ". . . for the first time, I understood the real meaning of the phrase, 'It spoke to me.'" He stood on that street corner in the cold and read the words contained in that book, and, he says, "My life has never been the same."

The most remarkable story in all of history is the change that took place in the lives of those early Christians after they encountered the risen Christ. They became fearless and unstoppable. And why not? They knew that Christ had conquered death. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of confidence in the power and purpose of God? It's God's free gift to all who will receive it.

Are you looking anxiously into an empty tomb this morning? Don't give up. There is a Friend closer than you think. He's calling your name. He is offering you a gift – the gift of abundant and eternal life for all who will receive it. Amen.