

Easter Sunday  
John 20:1-18  
March 23, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill  
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Notes not for publication

What you're looking for often determines what you see. A pastor friend of mine was taking a walk recently, and ahead of her she saw a dead bird in the road. As she grew closer, she could see the wing sticking up and a twisted profile, and she started to get anxious, saying to herself, "Oh, I don't want to see this, I don't want to look at it." She kept walking, and when she was right up on it, she glanced down and saw that the dead bird was actually a rag. Later on in the walk she saw a snake ahead in the road—that turned out to be a belt. She started to look inside herself and wonder, "Now what is this all about?"

When you look at your life or your future, what do you see? Do you see endless possibility, life rich and full, all your needs supplied? Or are there parts of your life you just try your best not to look at? Some of us have come here today fearing the future—the economy, the stock market so unstable, risking our jobs and bank accounts and mortgages. Some of us have come, torn inside with grief, knowing that our loved ones still remain in their tombs. Some of us have come on this Easter morning, all shined up on the outside but on the inside carrying around what feels like a tomb, dead body and all. This may sound melodramatic, but my experience is that our outsides don't tell the story of our insides. And that's on purpose—I don't want you to know my real story, and I assume that what you let me see is the only story you've got.

These expectations we carry, assumptions about ourselves and each other—these are a lens through which we see. It's the lens through which Mary and Peter and

John were looking on that first Easter morning. Mary went to the garden, with Jesus three days dead, expecting to find his dead body. She was expecting to be reminded again of the reason for her grief, to see that yes, this nightmare really is true. What she found was not the body of Jesus, but an open space at the entrance to his tomb, which had been sealed with a stone. She didn't look in, but assumed that someone had taken the body. She runs to tell the guys; Peter and John then run back to the tomb. John bent down, saw the linen cloths that had wrapped the body lying there, and Peter went all the way in, seeing both the cloths and the head covering. It's a progressive revelation of the fact that something very strange has happened—the stone is gone, the body wrappings are lying on the ground, and so is the cloth that covered his head. And if someone had stolen his body, they would not have unwrapped him to do so.

Note what these three do with what they have seen. Peter just turns and goes home. We don't know what he's thinking; he may not know what he's thinking. John, known as the beloved disciple, represents in this gospel the love and intimacy Jesus seeks with all his people—and John, the text says, believed. Believed what, we might ask? Not just believed that the body was gone; not just believed what Mary had said. John believed that the reason the body wasn't there was because Jesus was no longer dead. John didn't know how yet, he didn't know what resurrection was yet, but he knew that those cloths lying on the ground were connected to the promises Jesus had made about rising from death to life. One writer said that John looked at the empty tomb and "believed because he already believed" (Gail O'Day, *NIB* Vol. IX, p. 840). The

promises of Jesus lived in John's heart and determined what he saw that morning.

Mary, on the other hand, didn't "get it" in the same way John did, though she too loved and trusted Jesus. For Mary, the grief at first was apparently too much for her to be able to see and take in what had happened. The focus in the text is on her weeping: She "stood weeping outside the tomb;" the angels asked her, "Why are you weeping?" Jesus asked her, "Why are you weeping?" It's easy for us to relate to Mary here, for grief is a natural response to death, to loss, even just to change. You probably know somebody who's seemed to get stuck in grief, unable to move ahead. At the same time, every time I've had to grieve something in my life, I've felt like it took too long, like I should have been over it sooner. Sadness like that can keep us from seeing sometimes.

The different disciples encounter the empty tomb in different ways. Mary has come to the tomb looking for one thing but finding another, and in her distress, she sees angels, and she sees Jesus, yet she does not see. So Jesus speaks her name. "Mary!" She who had known him and loved him from up close, she who had stayed at his cross and tended his dead body—to her Jesus came close and said, "It's me. I'm here." Mary came to believe through this simple fact, his living presence where there had been only death—no big theological construct, no doctrine of life after death, no rapture, no complicated lesson on "what this means"—just his presence, and his voice, and his knowing and loving. These were the first signs that the horror of Good Friday would not be the end for his community of friends.

We who do not get to see the empty tomb itself come to believe that Jesus is

risen in other ways. On my trip to the Holy Land in February, we spent half a day in Jerusalem, visiting the holy sites and walking the Via Dolorosa. As I've said before, the tour guides always give the caveat, "We don't really know if this is the exact place where this thing happened..." There were people on my trip who really had no use at all for the churches built on the rock where Jesus supposedly fed the 5000, or on the little grotto in Bethlehem where he was supposedly born. To be honest, I too used to roll my eyes at the thought of such places.

But when I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which encompasses the supposed place where Jesus hung on the cross, the stone upon which they laid his body when they took him down, and the tomb itself—there I had a very moving experience. It turns out that it's actually fairly likely that at least some of these events happened on that spot. It makes sense that Jesus' followers would have remembered where he was crucified and buried, even if some other places didn't get recorded exactly. And there are writings from the first century that support this view.

In any case, I wasn't even particularly convinced of all of that at the time, as I went to stand in line to see the rock of Calvary. You have to climb up some pretty steep stairs, and the rock on all sides is worn smooth and dark by centuries of human hands. There are many different nooks and chapels in that enormous, sprawling church, and one denomination gets to claim one part, while somebody else gets another. In this case, the Greek Orthodox Church got dibs on the top of the hill where they believe Christ's cross stood. And you may or may not know that the Greek Orthodox Church is way into embellishment. Lots of gold, lots of silver, lots of icons of

saints who all seem to have the same face, lots and lots of those hanging red lanterns with candles inside. As my turn to enter the Chapel of Calvary came, I saw full-sized icons of Jesus' mother Mary and Mary Magdalene flanking an icon of Jesus on the cross. The shine of it all is just over the top—the women's robes and Christ's loin cloth are all silver, the whole background is gold and silver—and my first thought was, oh good grief. What a crazy thing to do to a scene that must have been a horrifying thing to witness. The opulence seemed extremely inappropriate.

At the same time, I was strangely drawn to the place, and after placing my hand underneath the altar to feel the hole in the rock, I moved off to one side to just look for a minute. And as I looked at the face of Jesus and the faces of the women who loved him, to my mind came the real people whose lives we had encountered just that morning, Christian Palestinian people who yearn for peace and freedom and for a just society alongside Israelis. I thought of them, living under the heavy burden of occupation, brothers and sisters of Jesus, born of the same land, also suffering. And through that lens my encounter with that place was changed. No longer did the scene appear gaudy to me; it began to tug at my heart.

And then I looked up. I looked at the curved ceiling, which was actually quite close. It was covered with a mosaic of angels and stars on a dark blue background. The angels were mostly just faces with wings, and they all were looking at Jesus. And my eyes welled up with tears, thinking that in the moment of Christ's greatest agony, his physical pain, his betrayal and abandonment—God sent the heavenly host to be with him, even as had appeared at his birth, unseen to others, maybe even unseen by

him. I was overwhelmed by a sense of comfort and peace, a sense of hope in the grace of God for such a troubled world. Most vividly I saw the love of God so close at hand in our darkest hour.

And if I can imagine the angels of God surrounding such a terrible moment, can I not also imagine the power of God at work in all our impossible situations as well? It is not Pollyanna to say that there must be a way to peace in Iraq after five long years, or in Israel after decades; it is a statement of faith in the resurrection. It is not naïve to hope for reconciliation between estranged sisters and brothers, whether in families or in the church; God wants healed relationships for us. It is not too much to look for the dead bodies buried in our hearts to be raised up, for what death is more cruel and brutal than the one Jesus came through and out the other side? Where can we go where God cannot reach us and bring us back?

Whom are you looking for? What are you expecting to find? Try to see, and try to hear. For the grave is empty this morning, and Christ is speaking your name.