

Second Looks  
Acts 10:34-43  
John 20:1-18  
Easter Sunday, 2020  
Highland Park Presbyterian Church  
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It's a story I've told before, but it fits so well today. Two small boys were a constant problem during worship for the pastor, and the parents did nothing to correct them. So the pastor recruited the help of her assistant, instructing him that if the boys were disruptive at the morning service, he should take them to her office and have them wait for her. Sure enough, the boys showed up with their usual vigor. After a short time of talking and laughing and making airplanes out of bulletins, the assistant took the boys to the pastor's office. When the pastor came after the service, she took little Billy in the office and asked, "Billy, do you know where God is?" (She wanted to emphasize that this was God's house, and that called for more appropriate behavior). Billy didn't even look up but remained silent. "Billy, do you know where God is?" the pastor repeated. "Billy, I'm going to ask you one more time, do you know..." Billy jumped up, ran out the door, grabbed his buddy and yelled, "Let's get out of here!" They ran all the way to Billy's house, into his bedroom, and Billy began to pack his clothes. His buddy asked him, "What in the world did that preacher say?" Billy said, "God is missing and she thinks we know where he is!!"

Mary Magdalene doesn't seem to worry about being blamed for the disappearance of Jesus' body. But she knew that Jesus was missing. What must it have been like to walk to a lonely tomb in the darkness of the morning of that first Easter? Other Gospel writers suggest she was not alone; at least one other Mary (perhaps the mother of James) was with her. But in John's Gospel Mary Magdalene is so startled that she runs to find his beloved disciple (we assume that is John himself) and reports to him. But she doesn't just describe what she saw – an empty tomb. No, she assumes there is a good, logical reason for the disappearance. "*They* (whoever that is) have taken him out of the tomb – and we do not know where *they* have laid him." Her first look at the empty tomb didn't tell the whole story, didn't reveal the whole truth.

Peter and the other disciple rush to the tomb. They both go in, they see the linen burial clothes, and John tells us that one of them "believes." But we don't know exactly *what* he believed, because the text goes on to note that they didn't understand the prophecy that he was to rise from the dead. Perhaps he simply believed that someone had indeed taken away the body. So they simply returned to their homes. *Their* first look at the empty tomb was not enough either.

Mary, on the other hand, is not ready to rush home. She returns, and weeping, leans in to confirm the unbelievable – an empty tomb. This time she sees not an *empty* tomb, but two radiant angels. They ask the reason for her tears, and she repeats her understanding - someone has taken away her lord. Then in one of the most touching scenes of Easter morning, she turns and sees Jesus. But she mistakes him for a gardener. He repeats the angels' question "Why are you weeping?" This time she suspects he may be the one who has removed the body. But rather than answering, he simply calls her name. And now, at second glance, she recognizes him. "Teacher," she calls out. He called her name, and she knew who he was.

He instructs her not to touch him – an impulse we recognize in our day – but to go and tell the disciples. Her words are most profound and transforming – "I have seen the Lord." No longer was that empty tomb a victim of graverobbers – it was a sign of the living Christ.

The pairing of this familiar Easter text with the Acts passage in the lectionary was at first puzzling to me. Yes, Peter is witnessing to Christ's resurrection and what that meant for his day. But it was difficult to connect the two stories. Then I remembered the backstory. The founding members of this new Jesus movement were nearly all Jewish; and Peter had been convinced that non-Jews must first convert to Judaism before they became Christians. He was not alone in that belief, but others had different ideas. Paul, for instance, had argued that Gentiles were saved by faith, and not by following Jewish customs and laws. He eventually traveled much of the eastern Mediterranean founding Christian communities among Jews and Gentiles alike. But just before the events recorded in today's Acts reading, as he awaited lunch, Peter had gone up on a rooftop to pray. He fell into a trance, and saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds – that is, very non-kosher food sources. A voice tells him to eat, but he declines. Those animals are unclean. The voice says to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happens three times. And he has no idea what to make of it.

Then the unexpected happened. A Roman soldier and colleagues appear at the door. They want to hear the message he has to deliver. And the meaning of the vision, on second glance, becomes clear. God is no respecter of persons, shows no partiality; Gentiles as well as Jews were welcome in Christ's new family. So he told the story of Jesus and right in the midst of his speaking, right after the words we read today, we are told that "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Peter's first look at Gentiles, it turns out, did not tell the whole story, or reveal the whole truth, any more than did Mary's first glimpse into that tomb. Even that bizarre rooftop vision didn't make the truth clear enough. But when those strange visitors appeared at the door, Peter got a

second look, a renewed vision, of people he would not have welcomed before, of people he would not have believed belonged in this budding Jesus movement.

Before we judge Peter too harshly, we would be better served to recognize that we human beings all share that habit of making judgements of others. It is more than a habit, in fact, but a necessity. Our tribal ancestors undoubtedly had to decide very quickly whether those unfamiliar faces approaching them were friend or foe, whether they should be prepared to greet them or evade them or fight them. And that's probably where most of us look first. But when we see *only* the race, or gender, or social status, or political party of another, when we settle for that first look, we fail to see the humanity, the beloved child of God, that Scripture tells us is present in each of us. When we welcome our work colleagues or neighbors and overlook those who clean our buildings or sell us groceries or collect our garbage, we, like Peter, are captive to our own limited vision.

These days we have no lack of revelations about this reality. It is the frontline healthcare caregivers, the grocery store clerks, the transit workers, truck drivers and fire and police officers who are being hailed as “essential workers” and receiving shout-outs for their heroism. And, sadly, we are confronted daily with the fact that we often depend on the work of the most poorly paid for the most basic of our needs. Our experiences in the face of the corona virus should prompt us to take a second look at those who serve us, often invisibly, and honor the human beings who toil just to survive, and whose labor keeps us alive. Perhaps those immigrant gardeners in our neighborhoods have more of Christ to reveal than we have imagined.

So our empty sanctuary at 330 Laurel Ave deserves a second look, too. Like you, I lament our not being together, not dressing up in our Easter finest, not listening to glorious live music, not blending our voices in song, not hearing the stories of Resurrection and new life or greeting one another with handshakes and face-to-face conversations during fellowship hour. And many of you have memories of dozens of Easters in that space. We are right to mourn the consequences of the current pandemic – not just the fear and illness and death, but the many activities and rituals and gatherings that make our life familiar and manageable.

But maybe there is more – more than we could possibly imagine right now. Perhaps looking at an empty sanctuary could reveal something brand new, some new life that we can only comprehend when we look a second time – or even a third or fourth time. I have long been intrigued with the words of the author of the First Letter of John. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” I learned this verse in the King James version, which still echoes in my mind: “it doth not yet appear what we shall be.” We will only

know what this pandemic means, what it means for us as persons of faith, as a congregation, some day in the future. But the verse goes on to proclaim, when Christ *is* revealed to us, “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

What an incredible promise! We live in a time of such disorientation, such rapid day-to-day change, such uncertainty, that we can’t possibly know all that lies ahead, what we will become. As Paul proclaims, “we see through a glass darkly.” But if we look beyond the obvious, refuse to settle for first appearances, the God who is not held captive in the tomb, who triumphs even over disease and death, has promised to reveal something new – to invite us into new life. Someday, like Mary, we will see him as he is.

There is a common saying that the church is not a building, but a community of people. The rhythms of getting together to worship and then going out into the world to serve have been disrupted. Confined to our homes, we connect with each other in different ways – through phone calls and letters, emails and social media, Zoom meetings and online worship. Like Mary Magdalene, we are constrained from touching, but we can hear the voices of those who know us, and we can tell others about what we have seen. We can be attentive to those who tell us of their needs, and seek ways to learn about the needs of those unable to speak. And we can also reach out when we are in need.

Since we have been worshiping in virtual space, unable to be together, it is remarkable that we have begun to know each other in different ways. We’ve seen into each other’s homes via Zoom, met each other’s dogs, shared what we are eating, learned how good (or bad) we all are at technology. We’ve been checking in on each other and praying for each other. And those who were confined to home long before this pandemic, or who have moved away, have been able to rejoin this community from time to time, see familiar faces, feel connected once again.

To be sure, none of us hopes this practice of “social distancing” will continue any longer than personal and public safety requires. We need to be in each other’s presence. But if we take a second look at what that empty sanctuary means, perhaps we, too, will recognize that it is revealing unimagined truths about God’s presence among us, about new life that is preparing to burst forth. We are, in fact, finding new ways to “be church.”

Like Billy who ran from the church, we may feel at times like this that God is missing. We’re often pretty sure we don’t know where to find God. None of us celebrates the loss of freedom, safety, health and even life that is occurring in these troubled days. But if Easter says nothing else, it loudly proclaims this. First appearances don’t count. What we first see is not necessarily what we get. Keep looking. Death is not the end. Look again.

Amen.