

I HAVE SEEN THE LORD

An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

University Public Worship

Stanford Memorial Church

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"I have seen the Lord," announces Mary Magdalene to the disciples in today's gospel lesson from John.ⁱ She goes to the tomb where the crucified Jesus was laid. She's shocked to see that the stone blocking the entrance has been removed, and she runs to tell two of his male followers. They come back with her and find an empty tomb with linen wrappings lying inside. Then they return home. Mary lingers, however, weeping outside the tomb, and is rewarded by meeting Jesus. He calls her name, "Mary!" and she responds "Rabbouni!" They have a conversation, and then he asks her to go tell the male disciples that she's seen him alive again.

This is the first eyewitness account of Easter. And Easter's the greatest day in the Christian calendar. "Lo, the Day of Days is here,"ⁱⁱ as we'll sing later in this service. Jesus' resurrection day moves us from the absolute desolation of death to the incalculable joy of rebirth. "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia! ... Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus' life, death and rebirth are the central events in Christianity -- Look at the 3 stained glass windows in the front of this church. It's the story of Jesus's resurrection, though, that spread like wildfire throughout the ancient Roman Empire and launched what became a new religion from its Jewish roots.^{iv}

Because Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ, she's been called "the apostle to the apostles" throughout Christian history.^v The four gospel stories of the resurrection differ in their details, but in all four Mary Magdalene is the first at the empty

tomb, sometimes with other women, and then she goes on to tell the male apostles.^{vi} But the men don't believe her, according to two of the gospel stories. Mark reports that "When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it."^{vii} Luke explains that "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."^{viii} Women were not considered reliable witnesses in the world of the ancient Mideast. They had no standing to prevent evidence in court, and as one biblical scholar puts it, their "accounts...could be all too readily written off as old wives' tales, silly stories told by foolish women who simply don't know better."^{ix}

Mary Magdalene also had a difficult reputation to overcome. Her name is actually only mentioned once in the Bible prior to Jesus' crucifixion, where she was said to be one of several women in Jesus' circle "who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities."^x In particular, she'd had seven demons exorcised from her. Her story also became connected with that of other unnamed women around Jesus who were caught committing adultery or who were prostitutes. In modern times she has been presented as Jesus' lover in plays, books, and movies like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code*.^{xi} In fact, though, the only solid biblical evidence about her beyond the exorcism is that she was wealthy enough to have been one of the patrons of Jesus and his male apostles and travelled with them, along with a number of other named women like Joanna and Susanna, providing for the men out of their own financial resources.^{xii}

Ultimately, though, the male apostles come to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. The gospel of John reports that the resurrected Jesus comes through a closed, locked door to stand among them.^{xiii} In Luke's account, when he stands among them, "they were

startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost."^{xiv} In Matthew, Jesus meets them suddenly, telling them not to be afraid.^{xv} In Mark, Jesus appears to the eleven as they are sitting at a table."^{xvi}

This story of Jesus' resurrection remains hard for many of us to believe today. In the gospel of Matthew, the chief priests are portrayed as spreading the word that what actually happened was that Jesus' disciples came in the middle of the night when the guards at the tomb were asleep and stole his body away.^{xvii} Others have said that the resurrection story was concocted by the early church so that it could become a successful religious movement. But then why would the church have told a story with Mary Magdalene as the first witness to the resurrection? Surely, they could have invented a more reliable witness and a story that would be more credible to the larger Jewish and Greco-Roman world.

The apostles must have been very discouraged after their leader's death. They had denied him and were on their way back up north from Jerusalem to the rural Galilee region from which they'd come. It must have taken a lot for them to believe that Jesus was alive again among them, and clearly they didn't buy Mary Magdalene's first report. But then there must have been very convincing appearances to them personally to turn them around and provide the impetus for a new religious movement which has now become the largest in the world.

Biblical scholars differ on whether the resurrection appearances were concrete bodily realities or visions -- a result of dreams, mystical experiences, or imaginative reinterpretations of other events.^{xviii} Liberal scholars like Marcus Borg speak of apparitions, particular kinds of vision not necessarily experienced by everyone else around, like the Apostle Paul dramatically experiencing Jesus' presence on the road to Damascus while no one else around him did.^{xix} Paul also explains that with resurrection, "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual

body,^{xx} implying that the resurrected Jesus was a spiritual presence but not a physical reality.^{xxi} Conservative scholars like N.T. Wright, who will be speaking here at Stanford in a couple of weeks, interpret Paul's words about resurrection to mean that Jesus was transformed into a new mode of physicality; hence, there was a kind of concrete reemodiment of Jesus, not just a purely spiritual one.^{xxii} Both Borg and Wright agree, though, that whatever happened with Jesus' resurrection, it was not a matter of a resuscitated corpse.^{xxiii} After all, Jesus resurrected body was reported in the gospel accounts to appear and disappear at will^{xxiv} and to pass through closed, locked doors.^{xxv} Both scholars would say, "Jesus lives again, but in a radically new way."^{xxvi} Theologian Rudolf Bultmann pushes us to the next step: "How the Easter faith arose in individual disciples has been obscured by legend and is not of basic importance."^{xxvii}

What is of importance for all of us, however, is Easter faith, in the sense that crucifixion and death are not the final word, speaking metaphorically as well as literally. It's hard to see beyond our current troubles and travails to hope, but every so often we do. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote about one of the witnesses at the Nuremberg war crime tribunals. What could have been a worse time of anguish and agony for European Jews than the Holocaust, when two out of every three of them were slaughtered between 1941 and 1945?^{xxviii} This witness had lived for a while in a grave in a Jewish cemetery in Poland -- the only place that he and a number of others could survive after they had escaped the gas chamber. One day in a nearby grave a young woman gave birth to a baby boy, with the eighty-year-old gravedigger assisting. As the newborn emerged and its first cry was heard, the gravedigger prayed these words: "Great God, hast thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah himself can be born in a grave?"^{xxix} A resurrection experience.

When we can't see beyond our current trouble and travails to hope, the cycle of the year can help. This is spring now. "Arise, my love... and come away," it is written in the Hebrew Bible Song of Solomon. "For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come."^{xxx} How great can our problems really be in the face of the great resurrection of nature itself? Smell the roses. Walk in the foothills of the mountains. Look up into the clear blue sky. Listen to the birds. Get some perspective.

Novelist Thomas Wolfe expressed it this way: "Pain and death will always be the same. But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower -- something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April."^{xxxi}

A fellow minister has pointed to daily ways we can experience resurrection: Just as there's cruelty, brutality, selfishness and abandonment, so there are values and principles that cannot be killed. They rise again and again, often in unexpected ways. Justice may be corrupted, delayed and denied, but it keeps emerging again in the hearts of people. Beauty may be surfaced over by concrete and by massive development, but again and again it finds startling new ways to shine through and drive out the tawdry and the ugly. Courage may be imprisoned in dank cells or the darkest of tombs, but it keeps unpredictably springing up anew in the hearts of the oppressed. Love may be long buried beneath hatred, but sooner or later the stone will suddenly be rolled away, allowing love to rise again, to walk with us, and to move us profoundly. So, positive values like justice, beauty, and courage -- they are continually renewed to inspire us and redeem human life. Most importantly, the power of

love to redeem suffering and misery, to overcome loneliness and fear does not die; indeed, it reaches into the grave and far beyond it.^{xxxii} "I have seen the Lord."^{xxxiii}

The reading from Psalms assures us, "God's steadfast love endures forever...This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."^{xxxiv} Happy Easter to each and every one of you.

BENEDICTION

(In words adapted from Clarke Dewey Wells^{xxxv}.)

O God of Easter and infrequent Spring...

Lure us to fresh schemes of life. Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity,

Whet us for use. Fire us with good passion.

Restore in us the love of living. Bind us to hope again. AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ John 20:1-18.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Lucian Hosmer, "Lo, the Day of Days is Here," *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #269.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Wesley, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" (hymn set to Lyra Davidica of 1708), in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #268.

^{iv} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 330.

^v Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 253.

^{vi} Matthew 28: 1-10; Mark 16: 1-11; Luke 24: 1-12; John 20: 1-18.

^{vii} Mark 16: 9-11.

^{viii} Luke 24: 11.

^{ix} Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, p. 224.

^x Luke 8:2.

^{xi} Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, pp. 179-187.

^{xii} Luke 8:3; see also Mark 15:41.

^{xiii} John 20:19.

^{xiv} Luke 24: 36-37.

^{xv} Matthew 28: 9-10.

^{xvi} Mark 16:14.

^{xvii} Matthew 28: 11-15.

^{xviii} Jean-Luc Nancy (as translated by Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas), *Nolo Me Tangere* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 219, 254, 349.

^{xix} Marcus Borg, "The Truth of Easter," in Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 132.

^{xx} I Corinthians 15:44

^{xxi} Borg, "The Truth of Easter," p. 133.

^{xxii} N.T. Wright, "The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection," in Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 113, 120.

^{xxiii} N.T. Wright, "The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection," p. 114.

^{xxiv} For example, Mark 16:14-19 and Luke 24:31.

^{xxv} For example, John 20:19.

^{xxvi} Borg, "The Truth of Easter," p. 135.

^{xxvii} R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1951), 1.45, as cited in Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 219.

^{xxviii} "The Holocaust," *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010) at www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143 on 4/3/10

^{xxix} Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, as cited in G. Peter Fleck, *The Blessings of Imperfection: Reflections of the Mystery of Everyday Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), pp. 52-53.

^{xxx} Song of Solomon 2: 10-12.

^{xxxi} Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (1937), as cited in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #555.

^{xxxii} Adapted from W. Edward Harris, "Some Things Will Never Die," in Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris, *Celebrating Easter and Spring* (Cambridge: Anne Miniver Press, 2000), pp. 72-73.

^{xxxiii} John 20: 18.

^{xxxiv} Psalm 118: 1, 24.

^{xxxv} Clarke Dewey Wells, "Hope Again," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #624.