

Easter B 2024 John 20:1-18

*I have seen the Lord!* I'm working with a group of pastors on a writing project where we are connecting our personal life stories to the biblical story, to the characters and events that resonate with our experiences. I've noticed that many of us are writing about things that happened to us a while ago, even back when we were kids. That's not because the Spirit isn't moving in our lives now, but because it's hard to see the big picture when we're right in the middle of things. Even though we all spent years in seminary learning to think theologically about everything, sometimes we still need distance, time, and perspective to be able to say, *Oh, I have seen the Lord.*

So we should be patient with the disciples when they are slow to understand what is happening on that first Easter morning. The twelve named disciples and the women, like Mary Magdalene and Martha's sister Mary who sat learning at Jesus' feet, had heard Jesus teach about his dying and rising. But in the midst of grief, fear, and the permanence of death, hope is not their first reaction at finding the tomb empty. They don't have four gospel accounts and 2000 years of Easter Sunday services, like we do, to help them expect a risen Jesus, because they are living the resurrection in real time, for the first time. We look back, knowing the whole story, but they are right in the middle of it; the best they can do to make sense of the situation is to assume, as Mary Magdalene did, that someone had moved Jesus' body.

Unlike some of the other accounts of the resurrection, Mary has not come to the tomb with the other women and with spices to embalm Jesus' body. She visits for the same reason any of us go to a cemetery and stand before a gravestone: to mourn the person she has lost. She stands weeping outside the tomb, so distraught that she doesn't seem to realize that something supernatural is happening. Peter and the other disciple look inside the tomb and find it empty except for the grave cloths. Yet moments later, when the angels speak to her, Mary doesn't seem to question where they came from or how they got inside the tomb so fast. Even when Jesus himself first speaks to her, she doesn't recognize that it's him.

It is not until this story becomes personal, until Jesus calls her by name, that Mary recognizes that the Lord is with her. When she returns to the other disciples, that's what

she shares first. She doesn't start with the message Jesus asked her to relay about his ascension. What she tells the other disciples first is *I have seen the Lord!* Nothing that Jesus taught or predicted, none of the scripture which Jesus had referenced meant as much to the disciples as Mary being able to say *I have seen the Lord!*

If we grew up in the church or if we've practiced Christianity for a long time, we may not even realize how strange it is to profess belief in the resurrection, to say *Christ is risen, He is risen indeed*. We proclaim the resurrection each week in the creed and every time we gather for a baptism or funeral. We may forget how incredible the resurrection is, that we believe that something which simply cannot happen, has happened. If we were to say to someone who had never heard this story, "Jesus died and was raised from the dead. This is what you have to believe"...we shouldn't be surprised if they don't. The resurrection defies logic, reason, and the rules of the nature; it simply can't happen.

Yet Mary *saw the Lord*. Maybe whatever life is throwing at us right now makes it hard for us to see the big picture, or even what is happening right in front of us, such that we're not able to understand exactly how the Spirit is moving in us in this season. But looking back at my own life, I can say, *I have seen the Lord*. All throughout Lent, at Wednesday night worship, we read scripture's stories of love: love among families, friends, and neighbors, love in the midst of grief—and we reflected on when we have experienced that love and how we are called to love others. Some of you indulged me during those times of reflection by coloring the hearts that became the wings of the butterflies floating in the chancel this morning—a symbol of love transforming us for new life. In all of those acts of love we have given or received, *We have seen the Lord*.

Today we celebrate that what cannot happen, did happen. Jesus said he would die and rise—something the disciples didn't understand, couldn't explain, and dared not believe. Then Mary showed up and said, *I have seen the Lord*. So much of our world we don't understand; so much of our world needs seemingly impossible healing and restoration—we need healing and restoration—so much we may not believe it can happen. Yet, *we have seen Lord*. So we welcome each new day in resurrection hope, trusting the power of God through whom we can boldly say, *Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia*.