

Those Who See the Risen Christ
John 20:1-18

Of all the persons who clustered around Jesus during his ministry of teaching and healing—disciples, silent supporters, and curious seekers—Mary Magdalene is not one that you would expect to have been a featured eyewitness to the resurrection. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the testimony of a woman in the Jewish world of the first century would not have been trusted. For another, Mary hailed from the Galilean town of Magdala, a place noted for its wickedness and immorality. Also, prior to Jesus' appearance to Mary at the empty tomb she appeared to be a background figure in the Jesus story. She was said by Luke to have been one of several women who supported Jesus' efforts financially, and she was listed with other women as being present at the cross and watching over the burial of Jesus. Other than those brief references there is nothing concrete about her in the canonical gospels. (There is much written about her in other literature of the period.)

Knowing what I do about how the New Testament came to be written and put together, I am amazed each time I read this story that it even made it into our Bible. Yet in each gospel where there is a list of those who came to the garden tomb on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene's name is given first. And John expressly says that she was the first person to whom the risen Christ appeared.

Interesting thing, isn't it? At the birth of Jesus the first witnesses were humble shepherds. At his resurrection the first one to see Jesus was a person like Mary. You can hardly help connecting these aspects of the story with Jesus' observation that the truth and power of God are "hidden from the wise and understanding but revealed to babes" (*Mt. 11:25*).

Sometimes at Easter we in the church get caught up in the effort to prove to skeptics that a physical resuscitation of Jesus' body actually occurred or we go to great lengths to explain "what the resurrection means," and we miss the sheer wonder and joy of the day. This morning let's back away from that and simply enjoy the presence of the risen Christ.

Have you seen the risen Christ? Foolish question, some might say. The Biblical literalist will be quick to point out that Jesus rose bodily from the grave, appeared to his followers for forty days, and then ascended into heaven. No one has "seen" him since that miraculous event! Well, Paul said in one of his Corinthian letters that Jesus had made numerous post-resurrection appearances and that Jesus had appeared to him (*1 Cor. 15: 8*), certainly years after the time described in the gospels. I think we can see the risen Christ. Mary's experience gives good suggestion as to how that happens.

Mary's story indicates that she was a consistent seeker. Even if she is assigned a minor role in accounts about Jesus, she seems always to have been present asking and searching. I suspect that she was more involved in the Jesus movement than the gospels say. It is clear that at the end, when identification with Jesus became dangerous, Mary Magdalene and several other women did not waver. She stayed by the cross when the men fled. She followed the burial party to the tomb not only to know the location but also to make certain that Jesus was laid to rest properly. Since there was not time on the day of crucifixion to prepare the corpse for permanent burial, Mary had plans to return to the grave as early as possible after the Sabbath.

So it was that sometime between three and six a.m., while it was still dark, Mary came with the other women to the tomb. Imagine her distress when she saw that “the stone had been rolled away from the entrance” to the tomb. Two possibilities flashed across her mind. One was that the Jewish authorities had removed the body. After all, Jesus had made statements about “rebuilding the temple” after three days; the Jewish leaders did not want Jesus’ followers to take his body and claim that he was alive. Or, maybe, thought Mary, robbers had looted the gravesite, a strong probability since Jesus, poor though he was, was buried in the tomb of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathaea. But had not guards been posted? Mary became confused and distraught.

She summoned Peter and John who rushed to the tomb and looked in. They saw the linen cloths that had covered the body “still in their folds” but no corpse. Possibilities came to the minds of the two disciples, but they went back into the city. Mary, however, could not leave. Her love and her hopes kept her bound to the place where she had last seen Jesus. At length she simply gave way to her grief. She remained a seeker to the end. To such persons the risen Christ appears.

Those who try today merely to win an argument about the place of the resurrection or to “explain” what happened are likely to come away empty. That’s not the point. Those who worship because it’s the thing to do or because they hope for something magical to happen in their lives will probably see very little. But those who come and wait, as Mary did, will be rewarded. George Buttrick once wrote, “One item about the resurrection of Jesus that has often been overlooked is this: He showed himself after death only to those who loved him. He did not appear in Pilate’s palace, for empire politics give him no welcome; not in the high priest’s court, for churchly pride leaves him no room; nor in the market place, for money-itch is not reverence. God’s beckonings are always by hint and gleam, lest we be coerced.”

If it was her love and gratitude that enabled Mary to see Jesus, was she rewarded in some way? Does God single out the faithful? Or, does our love and commitment put us in the right place at the right time. I think the latter. Honest and loving seeking prepare us to see. We become focused.

In his book entitled *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle says that most people's lives are cluttered with things: material things, things to do, things to think about. Tolle calls this "object consciousness" and says that for most persons it is the predominant reality. That is why their lives are out of balance. We cannot avoid concentration on "things." Life is made up of "things." But we can move into a deeper consciousness that involves an awareness. Awareness of the true significance of things and the place that we occupy in the scheme of things gives us freedom and opens us to experience newness and wonder.

Mary had made the transition. Her devotion gave her a fuller consciousness. She peered into the tomb for a second look. This time angels asked her why she was weeping, and she responded to them in a seemingly natural manner. The water gets a little murky there, doesn't it? Talking to angels? Well, the Biblical definition of an angel is a "messenger from God." You never know who might be that messenger or what form that messenger might take. You have to search and to listen.

And you have to be both expectant and ready to adapt. Mary did not come to the tomb expecting to find the risen Christ. She was prepared to honor a dead Jesus. However, it did not take long for her to recognize something altogether new and different. She was seeking, she was focused, and she discovered something wonderful. One commentator calls her seeing the Christ "the greatest recognition scene in all of literature."

When Mary heard the voice of Jesus, she lifted her eyes and saw risen Lord. Her response was spontaneous worship and adoration. A single cry escaped her lips, "Rabboni!" She used a Hebrew word which meant "teacher." As an intensified form of "Rabbi," this word had been increasingly used in reference to God. It is very similar to Thomas' expression of belief, "My Lord and my God."

How do you respond when the Lord calls you name? Even at Easter we are a little slow. Once I heard a minister say that on one Easter morning his phone rang at six o'clock. He recognized the voice on the other end as that of a faithful church member. The caller said, "Did you hear the news?" Instantly the minister turned on the television to see whether there was some national or international event he had missed. As he did so, he inquired as to whether there was some tragedy in the congregation. Finally he said, "Tell me what has happened." The caller said, "He is alive. Jesus Christ has risen." The minister confessed that he had spent all week preparing to proclaim the news of the resurrection, but when asked about what was most important at the moment, the resurrection was not the first thing that came to mind.

I have what is perhaps an unusual view that the first disciples have no advantage over us. We can see the risen Christ as well as they. Our lives are touched by truth. We have the spirit of the Christ in our hearts. We hear the word today. And so the risen Christ restores our sense of trust in what God is doing. The risen Christ comes to restore our hopes in a world that seems bent on self-destruction. The risen Christ restores our love and makes it flame forth in a world of hate. The risen Christ restores our enthusiasm for God's kingdom of reconciliation and justice and peace. Those who see the risen Christ rejoice not just today but on every day.

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