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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B10
Easter Sunday 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
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Sunday 4 April 2021 Recorded (4/3/21)

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:1-
Jn. 20:1-18

I Have Seen the Lord

"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord..." (Jn. 20).

Mostly we live on the shallow surface. We usually assume we understand the facts, that the everyday world exists in the way that it appears to us. But at certain moments we the vast depths of our unconscious life startles us. Out of seemingly nothing there arise titanic fears, desires and feelings that we do not understand. These forces grip us. They shape our thoughts and actions. Yes, we are rational beings. But there is so much more. In many respects we are a mystery to ourselves. Karl Barth writes that for us the truth is like a butterfly escaping through the fingers of a child (471).¹

If you asked me how I was last week, I would have gone on about how I'm adjusting to this totally new form of life, how great it has been to have our children home at various times over the Pandemic, that it won't be long now until we can be together. But sitting here in the Cathedral this week I saw what was really in my heart. Deep sorrow.

I thought of close family members who almost died of COVID and our niece's brain surgery. I remembered others who did die during the pandemic: my godfather, the college friend who was godmother of our children, two beloved uncles, another friend from my wife's high school, a close family friend who I knew from the time he was ten. I helped him prepare for confirmation. He was a member of this congregation. And we still have not buried him. There is so much more that I cannot even tell you about.

But I don't need to because you still remember: collecting bulk food, the flashing signs saying to stay at home, a spree of buying guns, the sirens in New York City, the people dying alone. Instead of regarding masks as a way that we can all protect the most vulnerable we turned them into another symbol of tribalism and politics. Although Americans make up 4% of the world's population we account for 20% of the world's COVID deaths. We have been hating and distrusting each other to death. We see new ways that race and poverty kill people.

We continue to roll from tragedy to tragedy. This week after all the new gun violence and anti-Asian racism we heard the testimony of those traumatized witnesses of George Floyd's murder. It is enough for us to break. We have made our home in a kind of tomb.

That day here when I looked up past the immense columns I watched the dappled sunlight streaming through the stained glass window of Mary Magdalene. And it was almost as if she looked at me with great kindness and whispered, "I have seen the Lord!" God is God of what we see and of what we don't see. God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

And Jesus gives us more than just ideas or beliefs. Jesus brings us nearer to God. This happens through practices, rituals, symbols, words, stories and prayers that help us. Jesus takes one of the worst things ever invented, a torture device called the Roman cross, and makes it into the tree of life, a sign of hope that God is with us in the worst suffering we can imagine.

Jesus gives us a way to navigate the depths that we experience in our existence, that mystery that we can only approach through symbols and intuitions. This morning I want to talk about the way John's Gospel acts as a kind of guide through this world. I am going to talk about the big picture, the focused picture and our picture. So let us enter the world of John's Gospel together.

1. The Big Picture. A mystery lies behind the Gospel of John. We do not know who the author is. But this writer is completely clear about the purpose of the book. He says that it is written, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31). I think this new life is the purpose of Easter.

There are no accidents in John. He uses an elaborate and rigid structure with recurring themes (like the struggle between light and darkness). These connect the various incidents he describes. He uses seven titles to refer to Jesus (like "Son of Man," "Messiah," "Son of God," etc.). Jesus speaks about himself using seven "I am" statements (like, "I am the true vine... the bread of life" or "the Good Shepherd," etc.). There are seven signs or miracles that help the reader understand who Jesus is.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first Jesus teaches and heals people. The second records the last days before his death and resurrection. Between these, two sisters convince Jesus to bring their brother Lazarus back from the dead and out of the isolation of his tomb.

At his later trial Jesus tells the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world" (Jn. 18:36). And indeed it is not. At his last supper he washes his followers' feet and shares a meal with them. He teaches that it is more important to serve others

than to have power over them (Jn. 13). He says I tell you these things so, "that your joy may be complete" (Jn. 15:11). There is a kind of Epilogue to the Gospel in which the disciples are fishing and the resurrected Jesus tells them to throw their nets over the other side of the boat. Suddenly the nets fill to a breaking point. It's an illustration that Christians are most effective when they listen to Jesus.

2. The focused picture begins after Jesus's body has been broken and laid in the tomb. It begins in the mysterious darkness of Easter morning. Mary Magdalene arrives to find the stone rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and the Disciple who Jesus loved. This Beloved Disciple is the one lying reclining closest to Jesus at his last supper (when Jesus announces who will betray him). Although Peter denies him three times, the Beloved Disciple has a secret power. It makes him fearless in the face of death. And so the Beloved Disciple is present at Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

On Easter morning the Beloved Disciple outruns Peter but waits outside the tomb. This is where things get a little complicated. The author uses three different Greek verbs for seeing. First, there is an empirical seeing which can include perceiving something beyond sense experience. This is the word the author uses to describe Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple's first experience of the tomb. Second, there is a form of detached seeing, as spectator does. This is the way Peter is described as he sees the linen wrappings in one place and the face covering in another. Finally when the Beloved Disciple experiences the same thing, the author writes, "he saw and believed."²

This brings us back to the mystery of John. At the end of the Gospel the author reveals that he himself is the Beloved Disciple. My friend the Bible scholar Herman Waetjen believes that the Beloved Disciple is Lazarus who Jesus brought back to life. And that seeing the same kind of face covering in Jesus' tomb reminded Lazarus of his own resurrection. For Herman that face covering also refers to the one Moses wore in the presence of God. He explains that when it was removed, there was nothing that would conceal the glory of God as it shined through them.

We may be able to learn from someone who came back from the dead, but the abyss of experience that separates us from that person makes it hard. After the two other disciples return home we have Mary Magdalene still waiting at the tomb. When Mary first turns she sees or fails to see Jesus in the same way that Peter did. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener. But when he says her name "Mary," she understands who he really is. She goes back to the others and says, "I have seen the Lord" (using the same word the Beloved Disciple did).

When we are in the dark, when we are lost or confused or feeling hopeless, Jesus seeks us out like this. Often it happens through the church as the body of Christ on earth. But God can do this work through a friend, a memory, a fresh loaf of bread, the shimmering leaves of a birch tree or a stained glass window.

3. Our picture. All my life I have not paid much attention to the role of the face covering in this story or to the way that masks – actual ones and metaphorical ones like race – conceal the glory of God that should be shining in us. But there has never been a year like this. We are nearing the end of a period of unprecedented isolation. Over this time it has become far harder for us to communicate and understand each other.

The preacher Frederick Buechner writes, “You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own.”³ Rowan Williams the former Archbishop of Canterbury writes, “When we say that Jesus is risen, we mean that there is no sense in which he belongs to the past; his life is never over. When we celebrate the Eucharist we do not put flowers on a memorial slab; we meet a living and active presence.”⁴

At Bible study this week a member of the Cathedral congregation talked about being hit as a pedestrian by an SUV and hurled 10 feet in 2010. It seemed almost certain that she would die, and if not doctors expected that she would be just a shadow of herself. But Jesus came to her in the form of another person who had been in a similar accident. She says, “It was not a near-death experience, but an encounter with transcendence. I was pretty devout before but all of a sudden I began to see the peace, unity and love that lies so near and all around us.” That joy and wonder is so tangible in my friend, my sister in Christ.

On my way here today I ran into three congregants at different intersections and I felt that same thing. My heart leapt with joy to see them in person. When we see each other next we are going to look a little older and a little more uncertain and awkward about how we reach out. But the glory of God will really shine through us again, because we have life in His name. His joy is becoming complete in us.

I have seen the Lord. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation* tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T & T Clark, 2004) 471.

² Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T & T Clark, 2005) 409-418.

³ Peter W. Marty, “The Post-Pandemic Church,” *The Christian Century* 24 March 2021.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, Hope and Love in a Time of Pandemic* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2020) 11.