

## **Seeing, Believing, Understanding**

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, April 4, 2010)

I Corinthians 15:19-26 (TEV) <sup>19</sup>If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world. <sup>20</sup>But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. <sup>21</sup>For just as death came by means of a man, in the same way the rising from death comes by means of a man. <sup>22</sup>For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ. <sup>23</sup>But each one will be raised in proper order: Christ, first of all; then, at the time of his coming, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup>Then the end will come; Christ will overcome all spiritual rulers, authorities, and powers, and will hand over the Kingdom to God the Father. <sup>25</sup>For Christ must rule until God defeats all enemies and puts them under his feet. <sup>26</sup>The last enemy to be defeated will be death.

John 20:1-18 (TEV) <sup>1</sup>Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the entrance. <sup>2</sup>She went running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

<sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two of them were running, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent over and saw the linen cloths, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Behind him came Simon Peter, and he went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there <sup>7</sup>and the cloth which had been around Jesus’ head. It was not lying with the linen cloths but was rolled up by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in; he saw and believed. (<sup>9</sup>They still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death.) <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples went back home.

<sup>11</sup>Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb <sup>12</sup>and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>“Woman, why are you crying?” they asked her.

She answered, “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!”

<sup>14</sup>Then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>“Woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who is it that you are looking for?”

She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, “If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned toward him and said in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (This means “Teacher.”)

<sup>17</sup>“Do not hold on to me,” Jesus told her, “because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.”

<sup>18</sup>So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her.

<sup>19</sup>It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. <sup>20</sup>After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

Do you like surprises? By surprises we usually think of fun things, like surprise birthday parties, or little packages neatly wrapped, given when we least expect anything. But there are some surprises that are not fun. Like trying to start your car some cold winter morning and discovering a dead battery. Or even worse, hearing about the sudden illness or death of a loved one.

Sometimes we react to surprises by saying, “I don’t believe it!” That happens when the surprise, or maybe I should say shock, is completely unexpected and out of character. For example, several years ago I arrived at a clergy gathering just as the chairman stood up and said, “An airplane has crashed into the World Trade Center in New York and another into the Pentagon.” This minister was well-known for starting meetings with a joke, and some of his jokes were a bit tasteless, so I just sat down and waited for the punch line. I couldn’t believe something like that could actually happen, but that was September 11, 2001, and there was no punch line, it was really happening. It took me a while to move beyond my first reaction, which may have been the reaction of many Americans, “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Whenever we read the story of the resurrection, especially in the Gospel of John, we hear about disbelief. Mary thought they had stolen the body. The disciples didn't want to believe the women, but Peter and John had to run to see the empty tomb for themselves. Thomas didn't even believe it when all his friends told him it was so.

When Mary came to the tomb, she found the stone had been rolled away. It was still dark, she didn't do any further investigating, but ran away from the tomb and found two disciples, and she reported her worst fears – the body was missing. She didn't believe in a resurrection – not at this time, not yet. She had brought all those spices, and now somebody had taken the body of her beloved Jesus.

Peter and John had to see for themselves, so they ran to the tomb. John stopped at the entrance and looked in and saw the wrappings. Peter ran right in, and he saw the linens, and then John went in and saw, and they believed. What did they believe? That the body was missing. Probably nothing more than that.

Mary still didn't believe that Jesus was alive. She saw an empty tomb, but was still thinking that somebody had taken the body. Then she saw Jesus, but she still didn't believe what she was seeing. Scripture tells us that she did not recognize Jesus. Why? Was it because she was looking down? Or because she had too many tears in her eyes? Or was it because she couldn't believe that he was alive.

And then Jesus spoke her name. And she knew.

That same evening, the disciples were in a room and Jesus came and stood among them. Can you imagine the turmoil when that happened? This was a surprise, a shocking surprise, a surprise that left the disciples wondering what to think. So that Jesus had to calm them down first: "Peace be with you."

Then they had to believe. They saw him, they saw the nail-prints in his hands, they heard him speak, and they had to believe. All but one – Thomas wasn't there. He missed it. He didn't see, so he didn't believe. I worry about all those who are like Thomas today – not that they don't believe, but that they missed it. There are many who are not here today. If they are not here, how can they see? And if they do not see, how can they believe? And even if they say they do believe – what do they believe?

That is so important – not just to believe, but to understand what the resurrection means for each one of us. Without understanding, Easter becomes just another excuse for a nice dinner and some new clothing. Or you might end up like that little boy who was telling his parents about the song he learned in Sunday School. He had the first verse was right, "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart. The second verse was OK, "I've got the love of Jesus, love of Jesus, down in my heart. But when he came to the third verse, there were too many words. He just couldn't remember, "I've got the peace that passes understanding, down in my heart. You have to admit, that is a real mouthful, even for we adults. Our little guy thought about it and then by leaving out "understanding" he came up with, "I've got a piece of Pastor, piece of Pastor, down in my heart."

Understanding is so important – don't leave it out as you celebrate Easter. Ponder the message of Easter, pray about the message of Easter, so that you might understand.

When the disciples saw Jesus, they believed, even if they could not fully understand. And then he gave them one more commandment – to go and tell – and to do more than tell. According to Matthew, they should go and tell and baptize. Not John's baptism, for the forgiveness of sins, but baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. This is a baptism of inclusion, the sign of becoming part of God's family. We often talk about baptism as the sign of joining the church. As infants we become members of the body of Christ through baptism, and then personally accept our baptism through confirmation. But our baptism is more than that, it is inclusion in Christ's resurrection. It is so important to understand this, otherwise the resurrection becomes just some kind of historical event. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so we who follow him have hope of being raised with him.

This is the meaning of Paul's writing to the Corinthians, that Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. Don't you see that this is the main point - - not just that God loves us – we learned that at Christmas. Not just that Jesus is alive – we heard that even before we came to church this morning. But that the resurrection of Christ is for us. This is what you must understand about the resurrection of Christ. It is not only that Jesus has been raised by God, but that we too will be raised with him. Death is not the last word for us, for Christ has conquered death. Because Jesus lives, so shall I, and so shall all who believe in him, who follow him, who worship him.

Have you seen the risen Lord? Jesus told Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And I would add, "Blessed are those who believe, and understand, and look forward to their own resurrection." Amen.