

Sermon: Seeing is Believing
Text: John 20:1-19
Date: April 1, 2018
Context: WWPC
Easter Sunday
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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

John 19:1-19

You can hear the pathos that fills this scene in the very first sentence.

“. . . while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb . . .”

She would have been there earlier -- she would have been there yesterday -- but the Sabbath laws prevented it.

So Mary spent two sleepless nights, tossing and turning, replaying the shocking scene again and again in her mind. She ponders the question of how this possibly could have happened, turning this, too, over again and again in her mind, but coming no closer to an answer.

He was such a loving man. Strong, yes. Outspoken, yes. But so loving and so kind. Kind to her. Kind to children. Kind to outsiders.

Kind to everyone who came to him, everyone who was honest enough to admit they weren't doing well and needed help. Kind to the wounded, and the excluded and the forsaken. Kind to anyone who needed love, or forgiveness, or new sight, or new life.

How the people could have turned on him will be one of the great mysteries of her life. She was there, in the crowd, just a week before. She shouted her own hosannas right along with the rest of them.

Now, their recent screams of “Crucify him!” will haunt her dreams. Assuming she ever sleeps again. After one full night of tossing and turning, she gives up on sleep altogether the next night.

Instead, she focuses her love and her grief on preparing the salves and ointments she intends to apply to his torn-up body, just as soon as she can.

But she doesn’t make through the second night. Before the sun is even up on the third day she gathers her things, the small bladder of water and the towel she will use to wipe away the dried blood, the salves she will use to dress his raw wounds, the ointments she will apply to perfume his body--all to properly prepare this kind and loving man for his final journey from this life to the next.

Her small satchel now fully packed, she heads into the night, toward the very last place she would choose to go. She heads toward the cave where they laid him after he had breathed his last, after they had finally taken him down from the tree on which his lifeless body hung.

She braces herself for what she expects will be the second worst day of her life, eclipsed only by the most horrible day, just the day before yesterday, when he hung there, broken and dying on that hideous cross. The love still pouring out of him, right along with his blood.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” she heard him gurgle, as the life left him. It shattered her heart so completely she thought she, too, might die right along with him.

Finally, she arrives at the tomb. But something is wrong. Even in the pre-dawn darkness, she senses it immediately. The tomb is open. She watched them seal it with her own eyes. But now the stone has been rolled away.

She feels her skin tighten. The hair on her arms stands up straight. A chill runs down her spine. She does what any sensible person would do.

She runs.

Twenty minutes later she bursts into the cramped quarters where the disciples are staying. It’s still early. Simon Peter and another disciple are the only ones up, and even they are still half asleep, not yet fully dressed.

‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’

She announces this news as if it were all one word. Her voice is so high, so tight with anxiety, she barely recognizes it as her own.

She does not yet know this. But the words will go down in history. For they are the very first words spoken on what will someday become known as Easter morning. They will be repeated millions of times over hundreds of years, in thousands of sanctuaries and places of worship all around the world.

But for now they fall on deaf ears. The two men are not sure they understand what the problem is, why she is so worked up.

Peter resists the impulse is to say the one thing everyone knows for certain. “He’s dead, Mary. Nothing matters anymore.” He knows that the ridiculous journey of following this nobody from nowhere is now complete. The story is over. It has ended in heartbreak and defeat.

But Peter also knows this: Mary has always been a step ahead of them. Faster to understand. Faster to believe. Now she has been faster to the tomb, faster to witness what may have been a conspiracy, or a crime.

“He’s gone,” she insists. “They’ve taken him. We can’t let this be. We must find our beloved Jesus. We must bring him back to his tomb so that we can anoint him, so that he may rest place.”

She is adamant. They know that look she gets when she will not take no for an answer. So, the two men have no choice. They pull on their cloaks and tear out like they are on a rescue mission, even if the man they are looking for, even if the body they hope to retrieve, has long since stopped breathing.

Finally, they, too arrive at the tomb. They take a cursory look around, not sure what to make of the scene that greets them. They see the grave clothes, a little pile of white, lying there, empty. And the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head, lying a little bit apart from the rest.

The light goes on for one of them, but Peter remains in the dark. He does not know what this means. He does not know what to do.

He does not have it in him to make a fuss, or to challenge the authorities. He just saw for himself what comes of that. He now knows what the authorities are capable of when they've been provoked. He wants no part of that.

He puts the cloth that held Jesus's head to his lips, kisses it, lays it back down, and heads for home.

Not Mary. She stays with her grief. It slows her down. It brings everything into sharper focus, causes her to see everything more clearly. Weeping, she bends over to look into the tomb again, just to make sure it is truly empty, that he really is gone.

Her eyes are flooded with tears, but the tears act like a prism. Only they don't break open the light. They break open the darkness.

Where there was nothing and no one before, now she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

"Woman, why are you weeping," one of them says.

She does not yet know this, but this is not the beginning of the second worst day of her life. It is the beginning of the very best day of her life.

For now she hears those same words again, "Woman, why are you weeping?" only this time it is not an angel that says them.

* * *

Pause. Take in a breath. Now fast forward with me two-thousand years, and come with me as we leave the Holy Land behind and travel to South Africa.

Susan David knows a little of what that moment was like for Mary, even if it took her much longer to experience it.

Today, Susan is a research psychologist, serving on the faculty of Harvard Medical School. But that's jumping well ahead of the story.

She grew up on the outskirts of Johannesburg. As a young girl in South African, she often heard the word Zulu people use to greet one another. “Sawubona,” they would say.

Sawubona It means hello, but translated literally it means “I see you, and by seeing you, I bring you into being.”

What Susan didn’t know is that she was about to be eclipsed. That the person she’d always been was about to vanish, unseen, into the shadows.

When she was just 14 years old, her father died--also on a Friday. The loss shook her like a personal earthquake.

Her father was 42 at the time. She was 15.

She remembers it to this day:

“My mother whispered to me to go and say goodbye to my father before I went to school. So I put my backpack down and walked to . . . where the heart of our home, my father, lay dying of cancer.

“His eyes were closed but he knew I was there. In his presence, I had always felt seen. I told him I loved him, said goodbye, and headed off for school.

“[After he passed] I went about with my usual smile. I didn’t drop a single grade [in any of my classes]. When asked how I was doing I would shrug and say “Okay”. I was praised for being strong. I was the master of being okay.”

Except of course she was not okay. Her grief was growing inside of her. It was like she had a dragon living behind her ribs. And it grew and grew until it threatened to eat her alive.

The dragon made her do things that weren’t healthy or sustainable. She was headed to a very dark place until one day her eighth grade English teacher looked her in the eye and spoke three short sentences that changed her life:

Write what you’re feeling. Tell the truth. Write like nobody is reading.

And she did. Susan Davis had been seen. She leaned into her grief. And the moment she did, she began to come back to life. She emerged from the shadow that was overtaking her, and stepped back into the light.

Mary didn't see Jesus in spite of her grief. She saw him because of it.

She didn't run from it. She didn't hide from it. She didn't pretend everything was okay. She did not deny that Good Friday had shattered her world, and left her feeling broken and wounded, right along with the man who died that day.

Instead, she leaned into her grief. She let herself feel it. And there, right smack in the middle of it, she saw Jesus through her tears.

Friends, this story, this ridiculous journey of following a nobody from nowhere, isn't over, it is just beginning.

For this, I believe, is our charge and our opportunity. This, I believe, is what it means to be Easter people in a Good Friday world: To fill up our satchels with water and towels, with the salve of hope, the ointment of love.

And then to head into the broken places of the world, the torn-up places, the wounded places, the dark places, and there to be greeted by the risen Christ, and there to embody the risen Christ.

So, sawubona, friends. And Happy Easter.

For Christ . . . is . . . risen!

HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!