

SLD03.27.05 Easter Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 20:1-18
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“Ta DAH!”

The dramatic tale read each Easter morning, Mary arriving in the garden to grieve only to discover that the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen, well, that story carries an important truth; indeed, the deepest truth of our faith – God’s victory over death. But it’s a post-resurrection truth, you know. Maybe even a post-Pentecost truth. That is, a truth discovered, discerned, claimed, and proclaimed by Jesus’ disciples only a good long while after his death. And then, only after some key reappearances by Jesus to folks people would listen to – which obviously did not include Mary. And even then, most folks had a pretty hard time grasping the reality of Jesus’ resurrection death. Even now we do.

So when we post-resurrection, post-enlightenment, post-modern, 21st century Presbyterian Christians pack the whole kit and kaboodle into one single Easter morning worship service – woman, garden, empty tomb, risen Jesus, good news – we have to confess a certain redactive license, a certain retro-rearrangement that reflects what we believe, or try to believe, today.

Because, after all, John’s gospel tells it differently. John’s gospel says that on that early morning when Mary goes alone to Jesus’ tomb to mourn it’s still dark, so dark she probably can’t even see inside the burial chamber where they’ve laid Jesus’ body. But apparently not so dark that she can’t make out the shadow of the stone rolled over to the side. And there, over to the left, the even darker hole at the entrance of the tomb. So she draws her own conclusions. "Oh my God," she cries. "They've taken his body away."

Her grief-weary heart breaking yet again, Mary wonders...even *after* Jesus’ death,

will they not let him, or his followers, alone? Will she not be allowed even to *grieve* in peace? All she'd wanted was a few hours alone with Jesus' body, and her memories, and her tears. Is even this to be denied?

So run Mary's thoughts as she races back to tell Peter and John what has happened. But disbelief is written all over their faces when she tells them, and she knows what they're thinking: surely she is mistaken. Surely she has gone to the wrong garden. The wrong tomb. And how she wishes they were right.

Out the door Peter and John bolt to see for themselves, Mary following right behind. By the time they arrive in the garden, the sun is just coming up and there's enough light to see into the tomb. John gets there first and leans down to look in. All he sees are linen wrappings. Intrepid Peter is close behind and once *he* arrives, crawls right into the tiny crypt, as though Jesus' body might yet be discovered in some remote corner.

John crawls in after Peter and the two men squat there in the tiny space, silent, sweating, thinking. You can almost hear the wheels turning in their heads as they try to sort out what on earth has happened. Try to make sense of what has happened. And what to do about it. There has to be some explanation for Jesus' disappearance, some way to get him back. Eventually, however, all they can do is crawl back out of the tomb. Grim-faced and quiet and without so much as a nod to Mary, the two men turn to walk home.

Standing alone beside the tomb, Mary begins to cry. In her heart of hearts she, too, had hoped the men would discover something she had missed. Bending over for one last longing look at what should have been Jesus' final resting place, she witnesses to her surprise, two angels, dressed in white. Before Mary can blink the tears out of her eyes, the

angels address her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" "They have taken away my Lord," cries Mary, "and I do not know where they have laid him."

Someone approaches. Mary turns and sees a man standing near her, a man whom John tells *us* is Jesus, although Mary does not recognize him. Maybe a cloud just covered the early morning sun. Or perhaps, as a woman alone, Mary doesn't look directly into the eyes of the stranger. Or perhaps, absorbed in her grief and consternation, Mary simply cannot see who is standing right in front of her; cannot grasp what cannot possibly be true.

Repeating the angels' questions, Jesus asks: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

They're standing in a garden; surely this is the gardener, surmises Mary. "Sir, if you have carried him away, "tell me where you have laid him, she pleads, and I will take him away."

Clearly, so far, the truth of what has happened altogether eludes Mary, John, Peter, *all* of Jesus' disciples. None of them has any idea what has become of Jesus' body, not even when Jesus stands before Mary's very eyes.

Do you ever wonder why? Do you ever wonder why the disciples don't get it? Why Mary, Peter, John and the other disciples don't understand what's happened? I mean, it's not as though they weren't forewarned. It's not as though Jesus didn't tell them, repeatedly, what was going to happen and what to anticipate after his death.

Why, only last Thursday during their last supper together, Jesus told his disciples that he's about to check out for a while. Point blank he tells them, "A little while, and you will no longer see me;...and another little while, and you will see me." (John 16:16)

Okay, I grant you, the 'little while' thing is a little vague – he could have meant he was fixin to run down to the corner grocery for his favorite tabouli. So his disciples pressed him about what he meant and he said "I tell you, you will weep and mourn... (hint: probably not about a run for tabouli) (16:20) ...I came from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I am *leaving the world* and am going *to* the Father. But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice.." (16:28)

Clearly Jesus was talking about his death. And it wasn't the first time, either. Again and again in the gospel he speaks of its imminent demise: to the crowd gathered at Bethsaida. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (J12:23) "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God." (J5:24) To the Pharisees: "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin." (8:21) And again, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (J10:11) To the disciples, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it will not bear fruit, " (J12:24) and, "Little children, I am only with you a little longer." (J14:33)

But last Thursday when Jesus says "I am *leaving the world* and am going *to* the Father, the disciples actually say they understand. They say they get it. In fact, they celebrate the fact that for once they know exactly what Jesus is talking about! "Now you are speaking plainly, and not in any figure of speech!" they say. "Now (for once) we know what you mean...(and it's not about tabouli)!"

But of course, the disciples *don't* know what Jesus means. Don't have the first idea what Jesus was talking about. 'Cause here's Peter and John at the empty tomb and all

they can imagine is foul play. Here's Jesus standing right in front of Mary and all she can see is the face of a stranger. I mean here are the disciples on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, with the resurrected Jesus standing right in front of them, and all they can perceive is death! What *is* that? What is John trying to tell us with this whole nutty, rather discouraging, scenario?

That recognizing the resurrected Jesus isn't as easy as we imagine? That knowing Jesus in good times, even knowing him well, may not help all that much with recognizing him in crisis? That knowing Jesus in the flesh isn't the same as knowing him in the Spirit? Maybe all that and more, 'cause Mary, Peter and John aren't the only disciples who blow the "name that rabbi" contest. In nary a one of Jesus' other post-resurrection appearances does his disciples recognizes who he is.

Remember the fellows on the road to Emmaus? The ones who chat and hike all afternoon with the risen Jesus? *They* don't get it. Hang out with Jesus all day on a walkathon for sadness, unload on him the whole poignant tale of their crucified savior, invite him to stay supper, and *still* don't recognize him.

And then there are those disciples fishing off the coast of the Sea of Tiberias who look up and see somebody standing on the beach telling them how to catch more fish. "Who is that guy?" they ask one another. Don't have a clue who's helping them out.

How *is* it that those nearest and dearest to Jesus can so totally miss his presence?

In her delightful book, Jesus, CEO, Laurie Beth Jones writes about a ten-year-old boy who once asked her, "Do you know knew what Jesus' first words were after he came out of the tomb?" "No," she replied. "What were they?" Confidently, the boy spread his

arms, jumped forward with a grin, and said, "Ta-DAH!"

If that kid is right, and I have a feeling he's pretty close, then the resurrection of Jesus Christ was hardly a subtle event. So how come his disciples don't get it?!

Maybe Jesus looks different after his resurrection. Or maybe folks just weren't paying attention. Or maybe there's something else interfering with the ability of Jesus' followers to perceive his presence.

Back when I worked for Coca-Cola, there was a popular saying in the marketing department that drove most of the company's advertising efforts: "Perception is reality."

"Perception is reality." That is, whatever we *perceive* to be real, for all intents and purposes, *is* real; an insight about human nature that opens a universe of power and possibilities for Madison Avenue. From the beginning, our open market system has shown that if we consumers can be persuaded to perceive one person or product as better, bubblier, sweeter, sexier or cooler than another, then that perceived "reality" will prompt our buying decisions. That 'perception is reality' undergirds our whole free market economy.

And, of course, the reverse also holds true. Whatever we cannot or do not perceive, what *doesn't* cross our radar screens, has little or no reality for us. Whichever realities we choose to ignore or avoid or are simply not exposed to - urban sprawl, domestic abuse, teenage suicide, a homeless vet.... simply don't register. And then, of course, there are those realities we don't attend to not only because they fall outside our experience, but outside our reason, outside our understanding of the way the world works. Like, *you* know, sightings of the Virgin Mary, or Philippino miracle surgeries, or short session meetings. Most of us assign any reality to those kinds of things. In fact, if we have any respectful

words for them at all, we call them ‘mysteries.’

Maybe Jesus’ first disciples weren’t so very different from us. Even though they got directly to hear and experience Jesus Christ in the flesh, maybe there was still no corner of their minds, no segment of understanding, no category of reason through which they could even register, much less grasp, such an outrageous reality as his resurrection from the dead. No matter how many times they *heard* it, even from Jesus’ own lips, nothing in their reason, nothing in their logic, nothing in their experience, in their genetic programming, prepared them genuinely to perceive it.

So maybe it’s *not* such a surprise that Mary, standing at Jesus’ tomb, hearing his voice, looking right *at* him, looks right *past* him. Maybe it’s not so hard to understand that those fellows traveling to Emmaus, when a nice stranger strikes up a conversation with them, they see him as...a nice stranger. And those fisherman, they were just going about their business as usual; someone wants to shout advice from the shore – what’s new about that? Happens all the time.

Surely those of us who struggle today with even the concept, never mind the reality, of Jesus’ resurrection, can see we’re in good company. Even those who walked and talked with Jesus in the flesh, who heard his voice and sighs and snores, who observed the miracles that he wrought, who personally felt his both embrace and the sting of his correction, who witnessed his passion with their own eyes, *even those who experience Jesus face-to-face on that first Easter morning*, even they can not perceive, of their own volition and resources, the mind-blowing, rule-rearranging, death-shattering reality of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Until Jesus opens their eyes. Until Jesus short-circuits their logic. Until Jesus unlatches their hearts. Until Jesus perforates their reason, punctures their doubt and penetrates their “reality” with a life-altering, death-denying power and grace beyond their, or our, comprehension. Only then are Jesus’ disciples able to see, perceive and believe who is standing before them.

To reach the travelers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus breaks bread with them. To open the hearts of the fishermen, Jesus shares their catch. To satisfy Thomas’ doubts, Jesus allows him to touch his wounds. To drop the veil from Mary’s eyes, Jesus calls her by name. To each of his disciples, Jesus reaches, opens, shares, touches, speaks, offers whatever they need to shift their perception of the empty tomb from a manifestation of the victory of death to a testimony of the power of life.

Not that the redemptive power of God is in any way limited to, or by, human perception. But why else did God, *does* God, send the Son, and after him, the Holy Spirit, but that God *desires* for God’s redemptive power over death to be perceived? Why else was, and *is*, the Word made flesh except that humanity might perceive God’s great love for us, that we might grasp God’s great passion for our wholeness, that we might celebrate and live into God’s great plan for the redemption of all creation?

Much is made of the role of Jesus as teacher, prophet and king, and surely he is all those things. But perhaps his even greater role is that of interpreter, bridge, marketer, broker, if you will, of God’s great hope of wholeness to humanity’s great heart of yearning. Do you see? Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent actively, persuasively, and finally *to alter our perception* that you and I and all humanity might finally perceive the divine reality

of the power of life over death. Whatever it takes.

For Mary, it was speaking her name. Only then does her perception change and she can see who stands before her. "Rabbouni!" she cries, as she throws her arms around her beloved friend. Only when Jesus speaks Mary's name does she become the first witness **of** the risen Jesus becomes the first witness **to** him. Only when Mary hears Jesus speak her name does she return to the other disciples with an even more farfetched revelation: "I have seen the Lord!"

For Thomas, it was the touching of wounds. For the travelers to Emmaus, the breaking of bread with Jesus. For the fishermen, a late morning fish fry. Whatever it takes, that's how Jesus will keep knocking on the door of his disciples' hearts, that we might finally perceive the reality of God's power over death.

'Cause the truth is, the life-giving mystery of Jesus' resurrection can never fully be explained to reason's satisfaction. It's never going to "make sense" in terms of the words and categories that you and I have to understand it. We simply cannot "get it" on our own.

But to those of who seek the resurrected Jesus, he keeps reaching...through scripture, through prayer, through relationship, through community, through disciples like Mary and Peter and Sally and Doug and Bennett and Jamie and Ann and all the rest of us who seek to spread the Word through our words and actions.

From every corner of our lives, Jesus keeps reaching...through all our thoughts and actions and experiences and dreams, and the risks we take to achieve those dreams. At Emory Church, Jesus keeps reaching...through our worship, through our mission, through our relationships, through our traditions, and through all the challenges to our tradition,

indeed through every single sign of new life that's pushing its way through this beloved community. From the kindnesses we offer the chaplains at Children's, to the heart-bursting music from our gifted choir, to the Safe Haven we're preparing to promise to foster children, Jesus keeps jumping from his tomb, arms outstretched, with a God-given grin, and a death-defying, Easter morning "Ta-DAH!"

Friends, can you not perceive it?

To the glory of God. Amen.