

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Easter 2009 – Sermon by Ruth Eller

*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."
(John 20:18)*

In John's gospel, Mary of Magdala comes first to the tomb on Easter morning. Why is she there? According to this version of the story, Jesus' body has already been properly prepared for burial, with no less than a hundred pounds of spices and ointments. It has been wrapped in the customary tight winding sheets and sealed with a great round stone, like a disk, rolled in front of the opening to the tomb. Why would Mary need to go back?

Perhaps she is simply missing Jesus. Mary Magdalene was one of his closest followers. Later legend identified her with other women in the gospels: the "sinner" who anoints Jesus' head in the gospel of Luke or the woman caught in adultery, a fragment attached to the gospel of John. But there is nothing at all in scripture to support that notion. All we are told about her is that she came from the town of Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and that Jesus healed her of some disease—in the words of that ancient world, he cast seven demons out of her. She is often considered an apostle. Paul said that an "apostle" was one who had seen the Risen Christ and shared the good news. In fact she is even called the "apostle to the apostles", since in the gospel according to John she is the one who carries the news of the resurrection to the other apostles.

So: missing Jesus, in the dark morning of the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the regular work week, she approaches the tomb where his body had been laid. Just to be near him, somehow or other. Just to be there.

And she finds the stone rolled away. Fearing the worst—that some enemy has desecrated the grave and stolen the body—she rushes back to the other disciples. And now come Peter and that unnamed, mysterious figure, the disciple whom Jesus loved. This disciple sees the empty tomb, and believes. We are not told what he believes, exactly—presumably he believes that Jesus is alive. Peter, on the other hand, doesn't seem to draw any conclusions. In fact neither of them, John says, understand what's going on. So they go home.

Mary, however, lingers in the graveyard. Looking once more into the tomb, she finds two angels, one on each end of the shelf on which Jesus' body has lain. She doesn't seem surprised to see them there—maybe she is too distraught to understand who they are. All she knows is that some unspecified "they" have removed the body of her friend and Lord. Then she turns around to face yet another person, one whom she takes to be the gardener, or as we might say the custodian of the place. When he asks her why she is crying, she begs him to tell her where the body is, so she can care for it.

Then the wonderful thing happens. It only takes one word: "Mary," he says. And she knows who he is, and what has taken place. A new kind of life has sprung up in the garden of death.

"I have seen the Lord," she tells the other apostles.

"I have seen the Lord." When I was a child, I once asked my father (also a priest) if anybody ever saw Jesus now. "Yes," he answered. "Sometimes. But don't worry—it won't happen to you."

He wanted to reassure me, thinking I was scared. I suppose in a way I was. But it

was a good kind of scared. I really wished I *could* “see Jesus”. So I was pretty disappointed by his reply. And I think my wish is shared by a lot of people. What wouldn’t we give to “see Jesus”!

This is what Thomas hankers after, as we’ll hear in next week’s gospel. He won’t believe in the resurrection, he says, until he can actually thrust his hands into the wounds in Jesus’ hands and feet.

Seeing Jesus—what a great idea. But you know, that isn’t exactly what happens—at least, not in the simple, literal sense, either to Mary or to Thomas. What happens instead is that Jesus sees *them*.

Mary thinks he’s the gardener—until he speaks her name. It’s when *he* recognizes *her* that Mary knows him. It’s the love of Christ, reaching across the unknown, across the shadows of death, through a transformed, even strange body, that touches Mary, and suddenly she knows who this is: “*Rabbouni!*” —“My teacher!”

And we are never told that Thomas actually does touch the wounds of the Risen Christ. All the gospel says is that Jesus recognizes him, repeats Thomas’s own wistful, wishful words about touching his wounds—and Thomas falls to his knees, exclaiming, “My Lord and my God!”

How can we, then, see the Lord? We can see the Lord when we feel the eyes of the Lord resting upon us, recognizing us, knowing us and loving us for who we are. In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep, and calls each of them by name.

When do we feel this recognition, this love? I believe it most often comes through other people. That’s the point about Mary’s mistaking Jesus for the gardener. He can come to us looking like just about anybody—anybody who recognizes us for who we are, and loves us for it. He can come to us in the love and acceptance of a whole community, too. We speak of the church as the Body of Christ. When the church is living up to its name, the living Lord is there in our midst. Not just a remembered hero who died long ago—but palpably present, seeing us, calling us each by name.

In another wonderful story of the resurrection, this one from Luke, we hear of two disciples going home to the village of Emmaus on the evening of Easter day. They are talking excitedly about the rumors that Jesus has been raised from the dead. A stranger falls in with them on the road, asking what they are discussing. He talks scripture with them. Finally they ask him to join them for dinner. Then he takes bread, blesses it, and breaks it—and suddenly their eyes are opened, and they recognize the Risen Christ. Like Mary Magdalene, they have seen the Lord.

He was an anonymous stranger who looked just like anybody else. And then he broke the bread, and they saw the living Lord.

This is what happens for us, my brothers and sisters, every time we meet to break bread in the Lord’s house. Like Mary, we have come bereft; like Thomas, doubting; like the disciples on the Emmaus road, hopeful. But whoever we are, for whatever reasons we have come, we are here because at some level, however unconscious, we have heard him calling us by name. And when we have looked into one another’s faces; felt the recognition and love and acceptance of the Body of Christ; shared the broken bread: then like Mary each one of us leaves this place as an apostle.

“I have seen the Lord,” we can say. “I have seen the Lord.”