

What Mary Saw
John 20:1-18

Easter is a disorienting event.

Back in the thirteenth chapter of John, when Jesus and his disciples were gathered around the table for the last time, and Judas takes a piece of bread from Jesus and goes out to betray him, John writes simply, “And it was night.” Three days pass and obviously the sun must have come up and gone down, but John never mentions it. It is as though Jesus is arrested and tried and condemned and crucified and buried, and the sun couldn’t find the strength to raise its head to a new day. Darkness prevailed. Even on Sunday morning when Mary gets up early to go to the tomb, John, perhaps the original ‘symbolologist’ writes that it was ‘still dark.’

So maybe that’s why Mary has such difficulty that pre-dawn Easter morning. Maybe it’s because the shadow of grief has dulled her perceptions and mental acuity- she’s certainly not at her finest, is she? She gets to the tomb and sees that the massive stone has been rolled away, and she high-tails it to tell the disciples that grave robbers have gotten to Jesus. Then, after the disciples have come for a look-see and gone back home, she finally goes into the tomb to see for herself and sees two angels sitting there, but she doesn’t recognize them as angels. In fact, she doesn’t seem at all curious about why two guys, two heavenly beings, would be chilling in an empty tomb in the first place – she’s still hung up on the grave robber scenario. And then finally, when she turns around and sees Jesus himself, she thinks he is the gardener. The only thing she gets right that morning is her ability to get to the disciples’ house and back without getting lost.

But here’s the surprise: it isn’t the darkness, whether literal or symbolic, that disorients. If it was it would have disappeared the minute the sun came up. If it was, Mary would be bumbling around in the dark all by herself, getting one thing wrong after another. But she isn’t alone; not by a long shot. We’re all out there with her, calling things by the wrong name, assuming that we understand what’s up when we really don’t. Thinking that we have the truth, when we couldn’t be further from it.

No, the disorientation doesn’t come from the darkness, but comes from Easter itself. Mary doesn’t get anything right until the moment she hears

Jesus call her by name; everything is off until the moment she encounters him. Only then does she see that the tomb hasn't been emptied by grave robbers as she assumed, as was the rational explanation, and that Jesus hasn't come to mow, which actually makes a lot of sense, but that something entirely different has happened. Something completely unexpected has happened. Jesus has been raised from the dead.

When I say that Easter is a disorienting event, what I mean is that it teaches us that we cannot trust our own perceptions. It calls into question our abilities to see, understand, draw the right conclusion; doubt our ability to clearly interpret the 'data'. It teaches us to doubt our own judgment; to disbelieve our ability to trust our assumptions. It shows us that our ability to see what is right and true and reasonable is sometimes very, very off-kilter.

And that's okay; believe it or not, that is good news. When it comes to God, to encountering God and perceiving what God is doing in the world, our intellectual capabilities are sometimes nothing more than a handicap. Our disorientation serves as a powerful reminder that some things are not a matter for scientific verification. Our powers of perception only get in the way. And this morning, especially, that is important.

I know you will find this hard to believe, but not everyone believes in the resurrection. People will say they can't bring themselves to believe in it unless they have proof, empirical proof, and if you've come here this morning hoping for proof, I cannot give you that. Not just because there is no proof, -despite what Josh McDowell would have had us believe, there is no evidence that demands a verdict- but because even if I had hard and fast evidence, there's no guarantee that you would buy it. There's no guarantee that you would see it for what it was.

Angels are really big these days – I'm not sure why but people get more excited about thinking that an angel watching over them than that God himself is. But if an angel came to tell you it were true, you would believe it, wouldn't you? Mary didn't. In fact she didn't even recognize that they were angels. They were just two guys, hanging out where they had no business hanging out, probably part of the riffraff that stole Jesus' body to begin with. Well, what if Jesus himself appeared to you? Mary got that wrong, too. Thought he was there to pull some weeds and trim the hedges. It wasn't proof that convinced Mary, it was hearing Jesus call her name and like the sheep, she recognized her master's voice, the shepherd's voice.

Easter morning is a reminder that part of what must be crucified in us on Good Friday is the ability to trust what we see, think, feel; the certainty that what we've been told by the world is true beyond a shadow of a doubt: The dead stay dead. The powerful and corrupt will always win out. The poor are lazy and dishonest. A CEO is a more valuable human being than a dockworker. God could not possibly love someone like me. The Church is in deep trouble, and we'd better get busy doing something about it or it may die out in a generation. Some things are beyond forgiveness. Death is the end.

And once those certainties have been crucified in us, the fun begins. That's when you can begin to see the face of Jesus in the man sleeping over a steam grate on a city street. That's when you can joyfully give your morning to washing windows at the church or purging the shelter of bed bugs, and know that you have worshipped God. That's when you can read an article about the increasing violence in the Middle East and not fear the worst, or hear about the dramatic decline in mainline churches and know that, if we are faithful to God, maybe not the institutional church, but God, the Church will never die out. You can face death, and know that it is hard, but it is not the end.

Your absolute certainty in what you see and know is replaced with trust in God, whose ways are certainly not our ways and whose love never fails.

Henri Nouwen tells the story about becoming friends with a trapeze artist, and asking him how he does what he does. His friend says, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher....The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly I have simply to stretch out my arms and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing I can do is to try to catch the catcher....the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him." (*Our Greatest Gift, a Meditation on Dying and Caring*).

The tomb is empty. Nothing we thought was true is true, and God invites us to be flyers, to let go and leap out into the air trusting that he will catch us.