

## Re-Cognizing Christ

John 20:1-18

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Rev. Benjamin Broadbent  
Easter / Resurrection Sunday - April 4, 2010

I.

Easter is a feast for the senses. For example, on Easter, “pulling out all the stops” is not just a saying. As our organist puts it, “Easter has only one volume setting: Loud!” Children, you may not know it, but your parents were not just thinking “Sunday Best” when they got you dressed this morning. They were thinking in a whole different category: *Easter Best*. Many of you have had a special breakfast or maybe your stomach is beginning to growl for an anticipated brunch. For me, today has such strong food connotations that whenever I have a particularly yummy breakfast during the year, I think of Easter. Our sanctuary is draped in white. The chancel is covered with lilies. The tone is triumphant and the mood is marvelous.

The Bible stories that we hear on Easter are also full of sensory sultriness. In the verses from John’s gospel, the following images are evoked:

A pre-dawn darkness. Can you see a faint glow on the horizon?

A garden tomb. Can you smell dew on the stone and grass?

A woman, Mary Magdalene, in despair and confusion. Can you see her face?

She runs to tell the disciples that the stone had been rolled away. Can you hear her breathing hard?

A foot race between Peter and the one John calls the “disciple Jesus loved.” Peter sets out first, the other catches up. They run together for awhile, until the other disciple sprints ahead. But Peter is the first to go in the tomb. Linens lying there, head cloth rolled up a few feet away. The two men, not understanding what has happened, go home. Can you taste their confusion?

But Mary stands there outside the tomb. As she weeps, Mary bends over and looks inside. She sees two angels. They ask her, “Why are you weeping?”

She responds, “They have taken my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid him.” She turns around and sees a man. It is Jesus, but she doesn’t recognize him.

Jesus asks her, “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”

Mary, thinking he is the gardener, pleads with him, “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, tell me where, and I will take him away.” Mary looks away from the gardener, perhaps to hide her tears, perhaps out deference to the man before her.

Jesus says her name, “Mary,” She turns around again, saying, “Rabbouni!”

The text is not explicit, but it suggests here that she embraces him because Jesus says, “Do not hold onto me,” explaining that the story is not over, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

For now, Jesus wants Mary to act as a witness, to go and say to the disciples, “I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God.” Mary goes to them and announces, “I have seen the Lord.” Then, she tells them everything that happened.

This wonderful story, buttered with images, syrupy with plot, and topped with sweet details is a feast for us today, this feast day we call Resurrection Sunday.

## II.

This being my fifth Easter sermon, I have to admit to a degree of anxiety as this day approaches. The hallowed hectic-ness of Holy Week aside, each year I am concerned, as this Sunday approaches, that one of my primary duties as your pastor, preacher, and teacher is to address the tension around whether Jesus’ resurrection was, and remains for us, a *bodily* resurrection.

And I struggle with this question because, embarrassingly, I am attracted to the possibility of a bodily resurrection. And I am attracted to this possibility in spite of the fact that I received an excellent education at one of the best, and most secularly-oriented, seminaries in the land.

I struggle with the question even though I studied with some of the best scholars of the historical-critical method, even though I learned source and form and literary criticism, even though I imbibed Bultmann’s demythologization, even though I was trained to distinguish the historical Jesus from the transhistorical Christ, and even though I have read Borg and Crossan and all the rest on how the resurrection accounts should not be read as history, but as parable.

I suppose I struggle because most symbolic or psychological or parabolic interpretations of the resurrection ultimately, for me, fall flat. While they may make sense *cognitively*, they are less interesting and less beautiful to me spiritually or, to use a term we have explored during Lent, mystically.

*More* interesting to me are words such as those of Updike, who wrote in “Seven Stanzas at Easter”:

*Make no mistake: if He rose at all  
It was as his body;  
If the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit,  
the amino acids rekindle, the church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers, each soft Spring recurrent;  
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;  
It was as his flesh: ours...*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence;  
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier  
ages:  
Let us walk through the door...*

*Let us not seek to make it less monstrous, for our own convenience,  
Our own sense of beauty, lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour,  
We are embarrassed by the miracle, and crushed by [our protests].*

It is difficult in this enlightened company, to admit that I won't, I *can't*, let go of wanting to believe that for God, all things are possible, And that a sure sign of God's possibility for the world is that Jesus got up and walked out of that tomb. In fact, I have no better way to explain the existence of the church today, 2000 years later.

But is it an *explanation* that we are after? Or, as the mystics have taught us this Lent, are we after a *glimpse, a scent, a taste, a sound, a touch* of God's presence? It seems to me a deeper question than "Was Jesus raised in a *bodily* resurrection?" is "How do we recognize the risen Christ?"

### III.

This is, it seems to me, the primary question at the heart of John's resurrection story, and the writer of John has deliberately chosen Mary Magdalene to play the central character. A female follower of Jesus becomes the first person to recognize the risen Christ. Against the verse in Deuteronomy 19, which requires two male witnesses in any court case, John elevates Mary's witness above that of the two men. Peter and the other disciple lack the ability to see and to understand what has happened.

My wife, Brooke, told me recently about a theory describing the difference between men's and women's brains. The theory is that male brains tend work more linearly. That is, men tend to give fierce concentration to one mental task at a time. This can be very frustrating to the women in their lives, whose brains are more able to make multiple connections simultaneously. I don't know the neuroscience behind these claims, and I acknowledge the potential harm in absolutizing these gender differences, but what if men and women *do* think differently, and what if Mary understands what the male disciples do not because she makes cognitive connections that they cannot. That is, Mary Magdalene, recognizes Jesus because she re-cognizes, that is, rethinks what is in front of her.

Notice in the text that, before recognizing Jesus, Mary does a sort of cognitive double-take. According to the text, she turns around *twice*. In verse 14, “She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.”

Then, in verse 16, she turned again in response to hearing her own name: “Mary” This time, she recognizes Jesus and calls him what she’s always called him, in Aramaic, literally, “My teacher.”

Her first turn around follows her own despairing voice: “I do not know where they have laid him.” Her second turn around responds to *Jesus’* voice, calling, “Mary.” Remember the verses from chapter 10 in John’s gospel: “I am the good shepherd (11)... [who] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Mary now understands anew the Risen Christ in front of her own eyes.

#### IV.

Teresa of Avila was another woman who saw God in a new way. Dr. Bernard McGinn calls her the premier mystic of the Counter-Reformation period. According to McGinn: “In 1559 the Grand Inquisitor of Spain published a... list of forbidden books, barring access to the devotional and mystical literature that had nourished Teresa and her [Carmelite sisters].”

“In that stage,” McGinn continues, “Christ appeared to Teresa and told her: ‘Do not be distressed,’ (that is, as we’ve sung all lent, *Nada te turbe*), ‘for I will give you a living book.’ [Christ] then began to grant her the visions and experiences of union that moved her to write the account of her inner life known as the *Vida*, or *Life*.”

In one of the most famous verses from the *Vida*, Teresa writes: “Our Lord was pleased that I should have at times a vision of this kind: I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in *bodily* form.”

We have no way of knowing whether Teresa *really* saw such a thing. We have only to decide whether she is a reliable witness, whether Teresa could recognize Jesus’ voice when she heard it.

There is no scientific proof of a bodily resurrection. There is no historical proof of a bodily resurrection. There are only witnesses, who, as Brueggeman puts it, “trickle in only now and then.”

The witness Paul wrote in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians: “I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died... [and] was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all... he appeared also to me.”

No proof. Only witnesses.

No authorized histories. Only stories.

But these stories have the power to make us turn around, and turn around again, and to recognize what has been in front of us all along.

Mary cannot hold on to Jesus' body, and neither can we. But to those who recognize his voice are given the power to become children of God. And for the children of God, today is only the beginning. We are being sent, commissioned to proclaim that death does not have the last word. For Christ is risen. Alleluia, Christ is risen indeed. Amen.