

Here in the garden we witness the greatest act of redemption in history – God breaking the power of sin and death through the resurrection of Jesus – and here is Mary staring tight at Jesus and not “seeing” the truth. She can’t process it at all. Faith is impossible without God’s help.

Mary makes the classic mistake we all make in thinking that we can figure out our faith all on our own. We think if we can get our hearts and our minds in the right state, faith will come easily to us. But such self-reliance contradicts the message of this story, which is that without God’s intervention, without Jesus coming to us and helping us, our faith is imperfect. Mary didn’t believe until Jesus met her. She was agitated, panicking, in tears, and not able to see Jesus right before her eyes. But Jesus clears her mind and assures her heart. Like Mary, we will need Jesus’ help to fully realize our faith. In ourselves, faith is impossible, but as Jesus says, “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

So, faith is impossible without an encounter with Jesus, but it’s also rational. Faith is based on evidence, and right before us we have some of the most important evidence the Bible offers us. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that he would die and rise on the third day. Here’s what I want to know: why aren’t Mary and John and Peter camped out at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning? Why weren’t they waiting to see a miracle?

The Gospel accounts of the resurrection do not show the disciples expecting the resurrection at all. They would require multiple sightings and hands-on eyewitness experience in order to believe that Jesus was really alive. And if it took all of that for Jesus’ disciples to believe, what kind of evidence would we need to knock down our doubts, to shatter our presumptions regarding the resurrection?

Nowadays we’re taught to think of faith as something that relates inversely to logic and evidence – as you get more facts and certainty, your need for faith goes down. But that’s not what Christians mean by faith. Faith is not hoping in what’s not true; faith means certainty about what you cannot see.

Compelling evidence is one of the greatest boosts to Christian faith. In this story we have one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the truth of the resurrection: the first eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus was Mary Magdalene herself. It is significant that the first appearance comes to a woman. Women could not testify in Jewish or Roman courts; the men who made the rules considered their testimony unreliable. Which means that if you are

fabricating an account of the resurrection in order to promote your religion or our movement, you would never make a woman the first eyewitness. And yet, in all four Gospel accounts (written by men!) Mary Magdalene is the first eyewitness, which means it must have happened. Mary must have been there. She must have seen Jesus first. There’s no other motive or reason for the Gospel writers to say that she was.

Faith has a significant and rational component, because faith is an act of the whole person, including the intellect. When Mary told Peter that Jesus’ body was missing, Peter ran to the tomb, entered and saw the grave clothes lying there. In Greek, the word “saw” is *blepo* which means to think, ponder and process. Peter used his intellect to comprehend the significance of the event based on the evidence at hand. He engaged his whole self in re-forming his faith. So faith is both impossible and it is rational.

Faith is also grace-filled, faith comes by, and in, grace. While Peter was in the tomb, Mary stayed outside. There she encounters Jesus, who asks her why she is crying. There are several places in the Old Testament where God confronts people who are seriously mistaken or wayward, doing so not with intimidating declarations but with gentle, probing questions. In the Garden of Eden, God asks Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” and “How did you come to feel shame?” To the rebellious prophet Jonah, God asks, “Are you right to be angry?” Asking questions helps the person to recognize their errors, to discover and embrace truth from their hearts.

Jesus asks: “Why are you crying?” It’s a gentle rebuke to Mary, a wake-up call. “Who is it you are looking for?” is a more penetrating question, inviting Mary to widen her horizons and to recognize that her estimate of Jesus is still far too small. But Mary misinterprets Jesus’ questions, thinking him to be the caretaker. And so, Jesus simply says, “Mary,” and then she recognizes him. Real faith is always personal. If you only believe that Jesus died to forgive people *in general* for their sins – but you don’t believe that Jesus died for *you* – you aren’t taking hold of Jesus by faith. You haven’t heard him call your name.

The graciousness of Jesus is palpable. Mary is running around frantically but she’s looking for the wrong Jesus. For a dead Jesus. For a Jesus infinitely less great than he really is. So she would never have found him unless he sought her. He comes to her, gently works to open her heart, and then breaks through with a personal address. Her faith comes by grace: she doesn’t earn it, Jesus gives it.

At the moment Mary realizes Jesus is alive, he sends her with a message: “Go to my brothers and tell them...” and in a sense Mary becomes the First Christian. Why? Because a Christian believes that Jesus died and rose from the dead. A Christian has a personal encounter with the risen Christ. At that moment, Mary is the only person in the world of whom those things are true. Jesus could have chosen anyone to be the first messenger, the first Christian. He chose Mary, not based on her gender, or her pedigree, or her raw talent, or her track record but based solely on his own grace.

The text reveals to us that grace is not just the cause of our faith, but it is the content, too. If you believe that Jesus is a great teacher and you believe he can help you and answer your prayers if you live according to his ethical prescriptions, then you are not yet a Christian. You have general belief, but not saving faith. Real Christian faith believes that Jesus saves us through his death and resurrection so we can be accepted by sheer grace. That is the gospel – the good news that we are saved by the work of Christ through grace.

We are to spend the rest of our lives tasting, experiencing, and being shaped by that gracious love. Real faith connects us to Jesus, not just for salvation from the penalty of sins, but for an ongoing love relationship with him. No two people come to faith in exactly the same way. If you read the whole chapter, you see that Peter, John and Mary are all approached by Jesus differently. They need different amounts of time. They require different proportions of evidence and experience. They all have different trajectories, different paths. But all of them, and all of us, come to faith with God’s help, through the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection and his surpassing grace, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon is inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 81-102.

The First Christian

Trinity Sunday, June 22, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance....[then] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:1, 18). With these words, the Gospel writer John begins and ends one of the most significant encounters with Jesus. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb expecting to find Jesus’ body in the tomb; instead she finds Jesus risen from the dead. Jesus speaks to her, and for the first time, Mary understands who Jesus is and what he came to do. It is from this encounter that we learn three important things: faith is impossible without help; faith is rational; and faith comes by grace.

Jesus had been telling the disciples over and over that he would die and then rise on the third day. Jesus’ claim was so widely known that his enemies heard of it and stationed a guard at the tomb (Matt. 27:62-66). And yet, despite these warnings, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees the stone rolled away, she immediately assumes that someone has stolen Jesus’ body. Not that Jesus is risen, as he promised, but that his dead body is missing.

To be fair to Mary, I suspect that would be our first reaction as well. We’ve never seen anyone raised from the dead. Even the disciples, who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, did not fully comprehend what Jesus meant about dying and rising. Belief in the person and work of Christ does not come naturally to anyone. Theologians call this “inability”: all the compelling evidence for Christianity may be laid out in front of us, the message might be as clear as can be, but there is in every human being an inherent spiritual blindness. We can’t see the truth when it’s standing in front of us. We can’t connect it to ourselves even when it is explained to us.