

Easter Day (Year A, RCL)

SEEING AND BELIEVING AT EASTER TIME (John 20:1-18)

By Greg Carey

Easter Sunday marks the holiest, most exalted moment of the Christian year. In Easter services all over the world, trumpets and organs blast. Flowers transform churches with their brightness. Worship leaders boldly proclaim: “Christ is risen!” Congregations echo back: “Christ is risen indeed!” The cycle of celebration and repetition begins as it should – a festive proclamation of good news. In Christ God has overcome the powers of sin and death, freeing us to live with hope and promising us life. Not just life after death, but full life, divinely inspired life, life in the here and now.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Even in these festive moments, many people express insecurity regarding the quality of their own believing. On Easter Sunday no less than other days of the year, many fear that their own faith is inadequate. They worry that they don’t understand enough. They obsess that maybe they lack full conviction. John’s resurrection account speaks directly to the nature of our believing. The story in John 20:1-18 (like those that follow) provides diverse models for experience and faith. John’s resurrection story rejects the notion that faith comes in only one shape, size, or pattern. As for the folks in the video that accompanies this commentary, authentic faith expresses itself in manifold ways.

Jesus is risen. John’s Gospel could hardly be clearer on that point. Jesus’ tomb is empty, as Mary, Simon Peter, and the Beloved Disciple can see. The risen Jesus appears in person to Mary, then later the same day to his disciples (with the exception of Thomas), eight days later to Thomas, and finally to a group of his disciples at some unspecified time. For John’s Gospel there’s no question concerning Jesus’ resurrection.

Nevertheless, the risen Jesus’ appearance is hardly a simple thing. The story makes it clear that Jesus is risen, but what sort of risen Jesus is this? Does he resemble a ghost or an embodied human? What is the state of his wounds? And why is it that those who love him most can see him without recognizing him?

Mary sees Jesus but, mistaking him for a gardener, she does not recognize him at first (20:14-15). The risen Jesus somehow passes through shut doors to greet his disciples, yet he displays his wounded hands and side (20:19-20). He even breathes upon them (20:22).

Moreover, despite Jesus’ ability to pass through closed doors Jesus invites Thomas to reach out

and touch Jesus' wounds (20:27). (We do not learn whether Thomas accepts the invitation.) In John 21 Jesus appears on the shore while his disciples fish. He speaks to the disciples, yet they cannot recognize him until the Beloved Disciple proclaims, "It is the Lord!" (21:7).

Let's consider the markedly diverse experiences of Mary, Peter, and the one John calls the Beloved Disciple.

On that first Easter Sunday Mary visits Jesus' tomb. She sees that the stone that closed off the tomb from the outside has been taken away, and she draws a conclusion. Running to Peter and that Beloved Disciple, she laments, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb!" Mary sees the empty tomb, but she does not yet believe.

Later Mary looks into the tomb, where she sees two angels. She's not there yet, explaining that she is crying because "They have taken my Lord" (20:13). Just then she sees Jesus but fails to recognize him: "Lord," she says, "if you have carried him away..." (21:15). Mary calls the gardener *kyrios* here, a word that can mean no more than "Sir" but also the same word she uses when she speaks of Jesus. Only then, when Jesus calls her name, does Mary come to believe: "I have seen the Lord!" (21:16-18).

Things go no more smoothly for Peter. Alerted by Mary, he and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb. It's probably significant that this other disciple outruns Peter. Nevertheless, Peter enters the tomb first, where he sees Jesus' burial garments. As far as we know, Peter does not yet believe.

In the second half of John's Gospel the Beloved Disciple provides the model of faith. He outruns Peter to the tomb. He peeps in and sees the linen cloths. He allows Peter to enter the tomb ahead of him. But when the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb, we are told, "He saw and believed" (20:8).

Seeing and believing provides one of the most powerful models of faith in John's Gospel. The Beloved Disciple sees and believes. Mary sees yet needs help believing. Peter sees, but he does not yet believe. Peter will come to faith in time.

The Gospel story judges none of these people. John includes the stories of Mary, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple without evaluation or assessment. All three come to faith. Seeing and believing takes its own shape in each instance.

In times of great loss we often need to see something. For many of us, seeing brings closure to the cycle of confusion and loss. Or so we believe.

The truth is, no one path accounts for the emergence of hope and new life. The Beloved Disciple can believe without seeing, a pattern that's highly valued in John's Gospel (1:50; 20:29). Mary needs a personal touch. She believes when Jesus calls her name (20:16-18). And Peter, having encountered the risen Jesus at least twice, has yet to fully believe. There's just no telling.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read through all of John 20. How do you assess the faith responses of Mary, Peter, the Disciple Jesus Loved, and Thomas? How are they alike, and how are they different?
2. Do you ever wish you experienced faith differently than you do? Can you imagine God accepting your faith just as it is?
3. Can you name someone you know personally whose faith you admire?

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