

Resurrection of the Lord (Year C)

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

"I have seen the Lord."

There you have it. The first ever Christian sermon.

Five little words. A subject ("I") a verb ("have seen") and a predicate ("the Lord").

Five little words preached from the mouth of Mary Magdalene - a woman who had shown up at Jesus' grave not to preach but to grieve. She had arrived, in the still darkness of the morning, to grieve the loss of her friend and teacher. Her Lord and Savior had healed and taught and forgiven and fed and saved. But where did that lead him but to be crucified, dead, and buried?

He lay as dead as could be in that lonely tomb for three days, long enough to be sure that it was no magic trick, long enough to be sure that he wasn't just in a mere coma but actually dead as a doornail.

Mary came to cling to Jesus, if only to hold his body. It wasn't a practical thing to do, at least in the realistic sense. No man or woman alone could move the stone by themselves. It didn't matter. Mary would simply grieve by the stone that covered the tomb if need be. Mary had a job to do and that was to grieve.

But what she found was that the stone had been rolled away. There was no body to be seen! Supposing that grave robbers had come to steal Jesus' body, Mary ran and told the other disciples. Two of them, Peter and another, ran back to see for themselves. The other disciple outran Peter and reached the empty tomb first. Too scared to enter the tomb itself, he merely glanced inside of it to find nothing but the linen wrappings sitting neatly to the side. Then Peter, breathless, arrived and stormed inside of the tomb to find the exact same thing. After Peter entered, the other disciple followed suit and we are told that they "believed" according to John's gospel text.

But what did they believe? They didn't believe that Jesus had been resurrected. But we can't really blame them. People who are dead tend to remain dead. It seemed plausible that perhaps the Romans stole Jesus' body so that the location did not become some sort of shrine to a fallen martyr. And so, Peter and the other disciple returned to their homes, believing that the bad had just gotten worse.

But Mary remained. Mary stayed and wept. Mary wept because, in her mind, even her Lord's dead body had been robbed of her.

But as she wept the most painful of tears, two angels appeared, one where Jesus' head *should have* been and, the other, where Jesus' feet *should have* been. "Why are you weeping?" they asked her. "They have taken away my Lord," she responded, "and I do not know where they have laid him." Apparently, she wanted to find out for herself so she turns from the tomb and leaves it in such a hurry that she literally runs into someone she presumes to be the gardener.

You and I, thanks to John's Gospel, know this person to be Jesus. But Mary doesn't. She continues her weeping and this "gardener" repeats the question the angels had asked of her with an additional query: "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?"

Bewildered at having to explain herself again, Mary asks the "gardener" to tell her where "they" took Jesus' body.

The "gardener" lovingly looks upon the woman and calls her by name: "Mary!"

And then her eyes are opened and she sees *Jesus*, standing there before her in the flesh. Mary understands that this is no angelic appearance of Jesus but rather an enfleshed, human, *risen* Jesus. Jesus abruptly tells her not to stay but to go. He tells her to go and tell the others of the good news.

And so, she obeys.

Mary goes and tells the others that five-word sermon that we began today's story with, that phrase that asks more questions than it answers: "I have seen the Lord!"

Five little words. Today (and, perhaps, *every* day!) those are the most important five words of our faith! We have seen the Lord! He who was dead has been risen. Jesus has defeated death and swallowed up death's sting in life and love!

And so, I announce to you this day that Mary's sermon becomes our own statement of faith. "I have seen the Lord" has been transformed into "*We* have seen the Lord."

These five little words of resurrection change everything.

Without this testimony, without the truth of the resurrection, we have nothing and are most to be pitied.

As Shirley Guthrie puts it, “if it could be said that the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls with any one claim, the claim that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead is that claim.” Simply put, the resurrection is what changes *everything*. The resurrection that gives power to the words “I have seen the Lord” is the truth that gives substance to everything else that we preach and proclaim.

Without the resurrection, the forgiveness we depend on is nothing but empty words.

Without the resurrection, the meal we are soon to celebrate at this table is just an empty ritual.

Without the resurrection, the hymns that we sing today are nothing but empty wishful thinking.

Without the resurrection, the Church is nothing more than a non-profit preaching empty rhetoric.

But the resurrection gives abundance where before there was emptiness. “I have seen the Lord” is a testament to the resurrection that is a seed of life planted within each and every one of us to be nurtured and grown into the fabric of our lives and the lives we are called to change.

You see, this five-word sermon is simply the starting point. Mary thought that she had run into a dead-end. She thought that death had had the final word and that everything she and the other disciples had striven for was dead along with her Lord and Savior.

And it is so very easy for us to join Mary in this place of dismay and fear. Another school shooting. Another person succumbing to substance abuse. Another family struggling to live on wages well below the poverty line. Another racially motivated attack. Another terrorist bombing like the one last week in Brussels that leaves 31 people dead and 270 more injured.

There is a narrative that wishes for us to do nothing but weep at the tomb’s entrance. Tears are shed, and rightfully so, because death and the narrative it preaches seeks to grasp us and keep us from seeing hope. This despair is embodied by one of my favorite singers, Sia. You might know her as the bizarre singer who keeps her face covered during her performances. In her hit song, “Alive,” she sings the following.

“I had a one-way ticket to the place where all the demons go,
Where the wind don’t change and nothing in the ground can ever grow,
No hope, just lies and your taught to cry in your pillow.
But I survived.”

Yes, sometimes it feels like we have a one way ticket to the place where all the demons go. Yes, it feels like things will never change and nothing in the ground will ever grow. We are taught to not have hope but to accept the lies and to do nothing but cry at the tomb’s entrance.

But within Sia’s ballad, there is tremendous hope. The darkness of her despair is matched by a relentless testimony when the chorus takes over and she cries, “I’m still breathing, I’m still breathing, I’m still breathing, I’m still breathing. I’m alive! I’m alive! I’m alive! I’m alive!”

This relentless hope is the gospel narrative of the resurrection. This relentless hope and defiant trust is embodied in the words, “I have seen the Lord.”

To borrow the words of the beloved hymn:

We know that Christ is raised and dies no more.
Embraced by death he broke its fearful hold,
and our despair he turned to blazing joy. Alleluia!

Friends, it is true that there is suffering in this world. But it is not *the truth*. *The truth* is that Christ is raised and dies no more! What *is truth* is that we have seen the Lord! What is truth is that the brokenness of the world will not stand because not even death can keep us from the love of God! What is truth is that we belong to a God who overcomes death and promises us life ever lasting. That truth is a power that you and I preach whenever we say that "we have seen the Lord."

"We have seen the Lord!" Five little words that change everything. And perhaps those five little words will spark other five-word sermons that you and I can preach together.

We will keep on loving because **we have seen the Lord!**
Death no longer holds us because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will feed the hungry because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will clothe the naked because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will love all people because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will welcome the immigrant because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will forgive each other because **we have seen the Lord!**
We are broken but saved because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will not give up because **we have seen the Lord!**
We are confident in discipleship because **we have seen the Lord!**
We will live in hope because **we have seen the Lord!**

Friends, I have seen the Lord and so have you. Let us go out this day and let that seed take plant!
In the name of the Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!