

“I Have Seen the Lord!”

John 20:1-18

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

At almost any hour of any week night, I can turn on the television and find a program featuring a detective, a police investigation, and the inevitable courtroom drama. I love the way the camera focuses in on those in the witness stand. They swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth; we see them squirming in their seats, sweating buckets of perspiration, tripping over their own words; and then the television viewing audience is treated like the jury. We are left to decide for ourselves who is telling the truth.

For two thousand years now, Mary has been on the witness stand. Her testimony is brief and to the point. She says, “I have seen the Lord!” Is she telling the truth? What truth is she telling? For some Christians, Mary’s testimony is the ground of faith. For others, her words sound like a fantasy, perhaps revealing a truth but not a literal truth.

So I’d like to spend a short time this morning reflecting on Mary’s Easter testimony, “I have seen the Lord!” As a person called to pastoral ministry, I often think my role is to believe what people tell me. Over the years, this is what I have found, that many of us ache for someone, finally, to believe the story we have to tell. Of course, this makes it easy to take advantage of me, and there are some who have done that. But for the most part, what I know is that when a story is told and believed, both the teller and the hearer are changed, made new in a way I can not explain. What I know is that when a story is told and believed, the relationship deepens and life is mysteriously more abundant.

When Mary tracks down the disciples in the place where they are staying and tells them, “I have seen the Lord! I believe her. I have no reason not to! Her testimony is absolutely credible. What she has seen is that Friday’s crucifixion is not the last word! What she has seen is her own sorrow turned to joy. What she has seen is that her hope has not been in vain. What she has seen is Christ risen, risen indeed!

I suppose I could dismiss her testimony as an idle tale. Some did. Many have. But here is my witness to you all. In believing Mary’s report, I find that the sting of death is removed from my soul as a thorn is removed from a wound. I find that I can awaken to each new day with hope in my heart, hope for all who suffer, hope for my church, hope for my neighbors, hope for my children, and hope for this planet. In believing Mary’s report, I find that though sorrow still visits me in the nighttime, joy comes in the morning! So, for me, it is not an idle tale but a life-giving testimony.

Mary is the first but is by no means the last to have an affirming encounter with the living God. The Biblical record continues with one encounter after another. Thomas places his hand in the risen Christ’s wound. The apostles have breakfast with him at the lakeshore. Saul encounters him on the road to Damascus. And where the Biblical record leaves off, the stories of regular people like you and me kick in. John Newton encounters the living God on a slave ship. Georges Frederick Handel has the encounter writing a score of music we know as *The Messiah*. Helen Keller meets God in the person of Annie Sullivan.

In her best-selling memoir, *Eat, Pray, and Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert describes a scene at 3:00 a.m. in her bathroom where she has been weeping so intensely there is a puddle of salt water despair on the floor. In that darkest hour she does something she has never done before. She prays. She simply asks God to please help her.

And she describes the presence of God, there on the tile floor, near the bathtub, in such a way that it is stunningly believable. I have no reason to doubt her. Indeed, her story encourages me to pray all the more!

One of the earliest traditions of the church that has been maintained here and there in different cultures around the world is what we call an agape meal. ‘Agape’ as you know is one of the Greek words for love. An agape meal is a love feast. It’s a meal where people of faith come together, sometimes in a private home, sometimes at a summer camp, sometimes in a church building, sharing a simple menu, but also sharing the very personal stories that begin with the words, “I have seen the Lord.” How would that be here, in this community, to have an agape meal? The invitation would say simply:

Come and eat;
Come and share an encounter with the living God.

This is the kind of meal that really builds the church. I used to think that building up the church meant increasing the number of pledge cards turned in during the fall campaign. I used to think it had to do with adding members to the rolls. Now I see that building up the church is a matter of empowering men and women, youth and children to find the words for telling their own story of their own encounter with the living God! Perhaps this very day, some of our Easter dinners will turn into agape meals!

Whole libraries of books have been written by scholars and laity alike on what Mary actually saw that first Easter morning. Was it really the gardener as she first presumed? Was it an apparition? Was she dreaming? Or was she simply there, in the raw place of her sorrow, open to the possibility of love’s resurrection power? It is because I believe her testimony that I am able to conclude each of my sermons, in the greatest of hope! Amen!