

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25:6-9
SECOND LESSON: John 20:1-18
April 4, 2021
EASTER SUNDAY

“Mary’s Witness”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Mary was not at her most coherent where we find her this morning. All she could think to say was, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him.” As she turned around in a daze she saw another figure standing before her.

He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, Mary said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

Just that one word, her own name, said in that most familiar voice, and the shock hit her. She turned to him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!”

When Thomas Jefferson rewrote the New Testament in 1820 he took out all of the miracles, any reference to the deity of Christ and the resurrection. He took out anything, in effect, that he considered irrational. The *Jefferson Bible* ends with the death of Jesus. *Godspell*, a 1969 musical that had great success contains wonderful music, but it ends with Christ being carried off stage dead. There is no resurrection. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the rock opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice made its debut in 1971. If it was the only exposure to Christianity a person had, they would be seriously misled, for Judas is portrayed as a tragic hero, Mary Magdalene as in love with Jesus, and it ends with Christ’s death. There is no resurrection.

It is the resurrection which defines Christianity. It is the resurrection which is the great folly of our faith. How can a man who was dead, live? How can a man be God incarnate in the first place?

The followers of Jesus were monotheists, strong, committed monotheists. The last thing they would ever do would be to worship more than one God. And yet almost immediately following the crucifixion all evidence points to the fact that they did worship Jesus. They claimed one irrefutable event as proof—he had risen from the dead. Jesus was not another God. They could not explain it, but somehow Jesus was part of God. Everything they had heard from him and seen him do now made sense.

If God had wanted to usher in a whole new political structure and kingdom at that point, however, God clearly did not go about it in the right way, because the people the risen Christ appeared to were of no consequence. As a woman Mary Magdalene had no legal standing whatsoever. Women could

not even testify in Jewish courts. As poor and uneducated fishermen and tradesmen the apostles' word could easily be ignored. If God had wanted everyone to convert, WE would think that the best way to go about it would be to have had Jesus appear to Pontius Pilate, or stroll into Herod's Court. It would be Caiaphas, not Thomas, who put his finger in Jesus hands and side. Jesus would have stood in the Temple alive and well for all to see with armies of angels at his side. But the resurrection was the beginning, not the end, and God never does things the way we would do things.

We are under the mistaken impression that if people are presented with facts they will see the truth. If nothing else, this year has certainly proved that wrong. Despite the fact that every local government election authority Republican or Democrat, and every single court in the land has affirmed that the last election was fair and accurate, at the present time there are still a large number of Americans who persist in believing that the election was rigged. There are people who believe that devil-worshipping, cannibalistic pedophiles are running the world, and that Bill Gates has put tiny microchips in the vaccines to control people. Conspiracy theories abound. And the problem when it comes to faith is that it's not just the superstitious who miss the boat. To be rational, and to rationalize, go hand in hand. The very rational Thomas Jefferson rationalized the divinity right out of Jesus. We are very good at seeing only what we want to see, especially if new evidence doesn't fit our worldview.

How would WE do it if Jesus came today? We would have had Jesus appear on 60 Minutes. We would have him interviewed by Oprah right after she finished with Meghan and Harry. He'd hold a press conference attended by all of the top news anchors. Anderson Cooper would probably turn up at the empty tomb to interview the Roman soldiers. And we think it would be a done deal. No more ambiguity, no more feeling embarrassed for having faith, no faith necessary at all in fact. Everyone would see, and everyone would accept. Except that that is not what would happen, because the human heart is perennially resistant to the truth.

Jesus performed miracles in the direct presence of the religious authorities for three years yet they still refused to believe. People can and do refuse to believe things even when the evidence is right there. There is no master list that totals the number of those murdered by the Nazi regime, but we do know that about six million Jews were killed, along with millions of others targeted as defective in some way—the Roma, commonly referred to as Gypsies, those with mental and physical disabilities, Slavic peoples like Poles and Russians, Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, gay people, and anyone who actively spoke out against the regime or gave shelter to Jews. There's photographic evidence. There are survivors who are still alive and bear the tattooed numbers on their arms. The buildings still exist! And yet, there are people who deny it happened. And even more frighteningly, there are people who admire Hitler and say that he was right. The human capacity to see what we want to see and reject what we don't is immeasurable. Our minds are just as fallen as every other part of us.

So God did it another way. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and appeared to his disciples. He lives. But we cannot come to experience and understand this glorious truth through our intellect alone. Pride has no place.

Only by faith and humility are our eyes opened. We have a God who knows what it is to be a limited human being, now eternal in the heavens. We have a compassionate advocate, a savior. And whatever disappointments, limitations and pain we might face in this life, we have hope, because this life is not all there is. God has promised to swallow up death forever and wipe away all of our tears. Today we rejoice, because Jesus rose from the dead to bring healing and grace to our world, and to give us a future and a hope. “Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” Amen.

Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.
⁹ In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

John 20:1-18

20 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. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”
³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. He was the last person Mary expected to see. The ordeal of the past few days had taken its toll. Jesus, the one who had brought meaning to her life, who had given her purpose and hope, was gone. It did not seem possible. There were not enough tears in the world. Her eyes were red and puffy; she could not stop the tears from streaming down her face. But as she stood outside the tomb knowing that it could not get any worse, it did. His body was gone. Two men dressed all in white asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"