

“I Have Seen the Lord”

John 20:1-18

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Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the Resurrection. What is most astounding, of course, is that she doesn't recognize him at first. She sees him but presumes him to be the gardener, the caretaker of the cemetery. It's only when the Risen Christ speaks to her by name, "Mary!" that she realizes in whose presence she is standing!

I am totally fascinated by this case of mistaken identity! Mary's blunder outside the tomb on Easter morning turns out to be a marvelous revelation of one of the most life-giving truths of all time: the living Christ can be found in the gardener, in the taxi driver, in the cafeteria worker, in the stock broker, in the daycare provider, in anyone and everyone we encounter in our daily lives! Christ lives! Lives in you; lives in me!

At first, Mary Magdalene doesn't recognize him! I love her for this because it makes her so human! She catches a glimpse of him and makes a quick judgment based on a first perception. It is when she slows down and begins a conversation and sees him eye to eye that she sees who he really is.

The reader wonders how Mary could have mis-identified him, for she had spent three years traveling with his entourage. I have come to understand that John tells the story in this way as a way of inviting church people to slow down, enter conversations, engage each other on a spiritual plane, and discover the Risen Christ in each and every person we encounter!

A first glimpse may be off-putting. But a second glimpse may reveal the in-dwelling of God's own Spirit. In a way, Mary Magdalene becomes the matron saint of church life. She is the one who looks beyond someone's persona and sees the real human being. She is the one who refuses to identify a neighbor by outward appearances, but strives to discover the soul within.

I learned this the hard way. When we lived here in South Glastonbury in my childhood, my dad was an avid member of the Hartford YMCA. He would play squash there with his pals. And if we children had behaved well, he'd have our mother drop us off in the YMCA lobby where he'd come and get us after his squash game and take us into the swimming pool. This we considered a monumental treat. The YMCA pool was as close to heaven as we could imagine. On the day I remember, and this day is burned into my soul, my mom dropped Bob and me off at the Downtown Y and we walked into the lobby and sat down on some leather-bound chairs. Waiting for dad to emerge from the squash court area, we saw a man walking back and forth in the lobby. He had a pronounced hump in the center of his back.

We started joking about it; laughing about it; making fun of him. And then, he walked directly over to us; confronted us; let us know we had hurt his feelings. When my dad finally came out to get us, Bob and I were both changed. Never, ever again would we judge a human being by their outward appearance. My dad knew this man. He introduced us to him. We got to know him. We heard his life story. He became a friend. He became the one who welcomed us to the YMCA on subsequent visits to the pool. I do not remember his name. I remember his insistence on being regarded as a child of God in whom the risen Christ did dwell.

I think of him every Easter when I read the story of Mary Magdalene mistaking the risen Christ for the gardener. This hunchback from the Downtown YMCA is a Christ figure for me. He invites me everyday to recognize the Christ in all the people I meet along the way.

I suppose Easter has many meanings. It means that life is eternal. It means that death never has the last word. For me, today, it means that everyone I meet holds the potential of revealing to me the presence of the risen Christ. Christ IS risen and dwells in your heart and in mine. May we all slow down, enter into conversations, and discover the Christ within the other. Mary's story invites us to do so. Perhaps this is what it means to be the church, to be on the lookout for the risen Christ in all the people we meet each day. In the greatest of hope, Amen!