

“I Have Seen the Lord”

John 20:1-18

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In this Easter sermon, I want to say just a few words about the power of testimony. On that first Easter morning, Mary runs from the tomb, finds the disciples, and declares, “I have seen the Lord!” This is her testimony. This is her story! Those five words launched the Christian Movement. Mary’s testimony energizes Peter and John and all the others. Her testimony energizes me! She speaks her truth and her truth resonates with all who believe. “I have seen the Lord.”

If you were in church on Youth Sunday a few weeks ago, you heard three teenagers speak their truths. Max Veilleux, Lauren Grandchamp, and Colin Rosadino shared their testimonies. They spoke about the abundance their lives have found by throwing themselves into the mission of Christ’s church. I sat up here behind them, and I knew, from the passion of their words, that they were speaking their truth. There was power in their testimony. It was like an Easter morning. Hope was born again in the hearts of all who were here to listen.

When Mary declares, “I have seen the Lord,” there is an unspoken invitation to join her in believing. Whether we ever actually see what Mary saw, we are invited to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. And that in believing, we will understand what Mary understood: that life truly is eternal; that life truly does transcend death; that God keeps the promises God has made!

I like Mary. And I like all the “Marys” in my life who have testified to their truths, who have been willing to say: let me tell you what I believe. Whenever this happens, it’s an Easter Day!

I remember the testimony of a Peace Corps colleague. We were walking down a country lane one day, chatting about what we might do following our two-year hitch. He just blurted out loud, “I believe in the goodness of people.” I had never heard anyone say that before. But it was a truth that found its way to my soul. His testimony rang true with me. I knew, in that moment, that he had found language to name something that mattered to me, something I could sink my teeth into. “I believe in the goodness of people.” I have long forgotten his name. But, like Mary, his words have made all the difference in my life. I do believe in the goodness of people. Believing in the goodness of people makes every day an Easter Day.

Mary was all alone on that first Easter morning. Thus, I would describe her encounter with the Risen Christ as an intimate encounter. Just the two of them. “Mary,” he said. That was all she needed to know the identity of the One speaking to her. This was not the gardener. This was the Christ. This was the One who had restored her self-esteem when her self-esteem was in the basement; this was the One who had loved her as no one else had ever loved her, when she couldn’t imagine anyone loving her; this was the One who had respected her simply because she was a human being, when everyone else was dis-respecting her. Mary was not a theologian who then wrote a textbook on the meaning of Resurrection. She was not a scholar who then designed a seminary curriculum on the history of Resurrection. She was simply a human being who had discovered a redeeming truth. She had a story to tell. And she told her story in five words. “I have seen the Lord.” That testimony has moved mountains.

There is power in a testimony. When we lived those eight years in Wisconsin, I got involved in the local drug and alcohol treatment center. They asked me to run the Saturday morning spiritual group. I agreed to this community ministry without a thought of what I might be getting myself into.

I had never done anything like that before, but I was young and open to everything new. That first Saturday morning, I sat in a circle of men and women who wanted desperately to break the addiction that was choking them to death. I figured I was there because I was the expert on spirituality. I had a Master of Divinity degree and the title 'reverend' in front of my name. But as I listened to one story after another, stories of surrendering to a Higher Power, stories of finding hope in surrendering to a Living God; I saw that the real experts were the ones in the circle. Their testimonies stirred something within me that I didn't even know was within me. They were all on a first-name basis for the sake of anonymity. Frank and Betty and William and Sally. It was as if they were all Mary, Mary from the Gospel story. They had all been in a dark place. They had all chosen to believe. And they all had a testimony that caused me to tremble. Each of those Saturday mornings was an Easter Day.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Mary and the others had chosen not to share their testimonies, to keep silence about having seen the risen Christ. I suppose God would have found a way to get the story out. God would have leaked the story to a journalist at the Washington Post. But I do wonder what happens whenever anyone has a moment of revelation, an in-breaking of the Spirit, a time when they might say, "Now I see," and then choose not to share it.

There is power in a testimony. This year, Easter falls on April 16th. But in my mind, Easter happens every time someone says to another, 'I believe.' Easter happens every time someone says to another, 'I believe God is able to bring new life to dry bones.' Easter happens every time someone says to another, 'I believe Jesus is alive in me.'

My college chaplain, Rev Judd, had a huge influence on my life. Perhaps, more than anyone else, he modeled what a difference a pastor can make. Twenty-five or thirty years after graduating from college, I picked up the phone and dialed Rev. Judd's number. He was still the chaplain at Trinity University. When he came onto the line, I announced my name. And without skipping a beat, he said in his wonderful Texas drawl, "Well, I believe in the Resurrection!" And we both laughed out loud! He was joking with me, but we both knew there was a deep truth in his words.

There is a power in testimony. My testimony this morning is simply this: I believe in the Resurrection! I know of no other way to be living in the greatest of hope. Amen.