

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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WE HAVE SEEN THE LORD

Acts 10:34-43
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

It seems that no one was waiting for the first Easter. No one rose early to hear the good news proclaimed. None expected there to be any good news. Those that rose early may have done so out of habit or because their unconsolated grief would not let them sleep.

Mary Magdalene had risen and gone to the tomb to anoint the hastily buried body in the customary way the Jews anoint their dead.

No one had experienced any good in what we call Good Friday, for it had been — and was to them still — a very bad Friday.

If we can wait with them (as they waited), maybe this morning we can hear the good news fresh and be as surprised as they were at how good the news really is.

They had lost a friend and more. The one they had spent so much time with, whom they had left everything to follow, had been cruelly snatched from them.

They were numb with grief. And what was not numb was angry, or confused, or whatever else left them feeling that nothing could be done that would matter. Things, for a time, had ceased to make any difference.

If the word injustice had any meaning at all, certainly this punishment had been an injustice. If there had ever been an act of senseless violence, this was one.

They had heard what John's gospel records as his last words. They had heard him say, *It is finished*.

There seemed to be so little life left in him. So much of the man who had walked among them had been lost to a lifelessness, to death.

He said, *It is finished*. It is over, ended. The little bit of life he had left acknowledged that death had won, that the days of his life were all behind, death would allow him no more. He would soon be as dead as any person can be.

We hear his words, *It is finished*, and wonder what they mean.

Do they mean only that it is over? That his life, whatever its purpose, whatever its meaning, had been interrupted by this cruel twist of fate that now brought him to his end.

We have seen his life. It is a life in which we can only see goodness. When we were too busy to be bothered with children, he stopped what he was doing and spent time with them.

Another time in the crowd, amid the bumping and jostling, he felt the lightest of touches from a woman who needed his help.

When he saw a wrong, he spoke — when it would have been easier just to remain silent, as we have often done.

When we would have been impatient, he took the time to be patient, as if he had all the time in the world. People we would have ignored or given a quick brush off, he treated kindly.

If ever we have seen a life touched by God, it is his. But if he means only that it is over, then he is just another saintly victim of human wickedness and foolishness. [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 32]

If his life means no more than that, what can our life and death mean?

Do we merely live from day to day with no more reason to be kind than to be selfish and come to the end of our days with no one to notice our passing except as those we knew may occasionally give us some thought?

If that is all his life meant, then we must suspect that ours mean even less.

The disciples and the others who had followed Jesus had waited for two days expecting the worst, expecting that finally *It is finished* meant no more than that, no more than *It is over, ended* and that whatever meaning human life may have had ended, too.

Little did they realize that there was another possibility. Little did they suspect that, just when death seemed to have won, it had been, for all times, decisively defeated.

When Jesus said, *It is finished*, he meant more than merely that his life was over. He meant that he had completed what his life was for: That this horror was more than senseless evil, though it was certainly that; it was also the very way that God was working his good work; that everything that needed to be done had been done; that God was loving us, even in the crucifixion, and, because of the crucifixion, God was making us into the kind of people who would love each other and God in the same way God loves us; and that **that** is the meaning of our life.

That is what surprised. They experienced only the Jesus of it. Now they were surprised by the Christ of it.

Frederick Buechner wrote a book called *Peculiar Treasures*. It is a Who's Who of Bible characters. In the character sketch of Mary Magdalene, he wrote: *She seems to have teamed up with Jesus early in the game and to have stuck with him to the end. And beyond.*

It's at the end that she comes into focus most clearly. She was one of the women who was there in the background when he was being crucified...and she was also one of the ones who was there when they put what was left of him in the tomb. But the time that you see her best was on the first Sunday morning after his death.

John is the one who gives the greatest detail, and according to him, it was still dark when she went to the tomb to discover that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance and that, inside, it was empty as a drum. She ran back to wherever the disciples were hiding out to tell them, and Peter and one of the others returned with her to check out her story. They found out that it was true and that there was nothing there except some pieces of cloth the body had been wrapped in. They left then, but Mary stayed on outside the tomb someplace and started to cry. Two angels came and asked her what she was crying about, and she said, "Because they have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She wasn't thinking in terms of anything miraculous, in other words; she was thinking simply that even in death they wouldn't let him be and somebody had stolen his body.

Then another person came up to her and asked her the same questions. Why was she crying? What was she doing there? She decided it must be somebody in charge, like the gardener maybe, and she said if he was the one who had moved the body somewhere else, would he please tell her where it was so she could go there?

*Instead of answering her, he spoke her name — Mary — and then she recognized who he was, and though from that instant forward the whole course of human history was changed in so many profound and complex ways that it's impossible to imagine how it would have been different otherwise, for Mary Magdalene the only thing that had changed was that for reasons she was in no state to consider, her old friend and teacher and strong right arm was alive again. **Rabboni**, she shouted and was about to throw her arms around him for sheer joy and astonishment when he stopped her.*

Don't touch me, he said, Don't hold on to me, thus making her not only the first person in the world to have her heart stop beating for a second to find him alive again when she's thought he was dead as a doornail but the first person also to have her heart break a little to realize that he couldn't be touched any more, a shoulder to weep on, because the life in him was no longer a life she could know by touching it, with her here and with him here too, but a life she could know only by living it: with her here and him here too, alive inside her life, to raise her up also out the wreckage of all that was wrecked in her and dead.

*In the meanwhile, he had much to do and far to go, he said, and so did she, and the first thing she did was go back to the disciples to report, **I have seen the Lord**, she said, and whatever dark doubts they might have had on the subject earlier, one look at her face was enough to melt them all away like morning mist. [Buechner, **Peculiar Treasures**, 102-103]*

While it is tempting, I think, to believe that humanity had a bad day, a *really* bad day, when we crucified Christ, I do not believe that it was the worst of humanity we saw that day. Two of the pillars of the civilization of the ancient world were Jewish piety and Roman law. Together they (the *best* that humanity had yet devised) conspired to put Christ to death.

All major Christian creeds affirm belief in the resurrection of the body. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God in spite of everything prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of a human being but a new and revised version of all the things which made that person the particular human being he was and which he needs something like a body to express: personality, the way he looked, the sound of his voice, his peculiar capacity for creating and loving, in some sense his face. [WT, 43]

It was that embodied Jesus Christ that Mary saw; she heard the sound of his voice, saw his face.

On Easter, we celebrate the resurrection and the gift to us of eternal life. What we see is what the unspeakable love of God had done and is doing. The life we see in Christ is the life God offers us, because that's the way God is.

The good news had broken through. And human life was changed. No longer do we have to fight fire with fire. We can fight fire with water (to use baptismal language) or whatever image we use to describe the kind and gentle grace of Christ. Because the power of the resurrection is changing us, as we live, into people who can love as Christ loves us.

On Easter, God had a very good day. And it is the best day human beings ever had too, because we have seen the Lord.