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John 20:1-18

RESURRECTION PERSPECTIVE

The Bible contains four accounts of the Resurrection event. The four gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--those books of the Bible which record the life and teachings of Jesus, each has its own version of the Resurrection story. In Matthew, an earthquake occurs as the women come to the tomb in the early morning, and the stone rolls away right in front of them. An angel appears and the guards standing at the tomb are so overcome with fear they pass out. The angel then tells the women that Jesus isn't there but has been raised. As the women leave to go tell the disciples suddenly Jesus himself appears to them.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the women coming to the tomb with spices for applying to the body but these women find that the stone has already been rolled away from the tomb. A young man in dazzling clothing tells the women that Jesus is raised and that they will see Jesus in the city of Galilee. Then they are told to tell the disciples this news. But the women leave in fear and say nothing to anyone. According to what is believed to be the original ending of Mark's gospel, there is no actual appearance of Jesus on that Easter morning.

Luke's gospel has the women coming to the tomb with spices, finding the stone rolled away, and then seeing *two* men in dazzling white clothes who announce Jesus' resurrection. The women leave the tomb and tell the disciples this news but the men do not believe the women. Jesus makes no appearance at the tomb but according to Luke shows up later that day to some of his followers who are traveling to the city of Emmaus.

And then we have John's version--the one we read today. I love this version of the Resurrection because the way the writer brings such real, understandable emotion into the story.

We are given a view of Mary Magdalene's deep grief over Jesus' death and her horror at finding the body gone. The tragedy of Jesus' brutal and agonizing death is now compounded by the indignity of having his body stolen. This is what she believes has taken place to her dear friend and she stands there at the tomb weeping. But then Jesus appears to her. But at first, she doesn't know it is Jesus. She mistakes him for the gardener. I love this detail of the story. It's so believable. Maybe it was her tears that blurred her vision from seeing Jesus clearly. Or maybe it was her expectations that blinded her--after all, she expected a dead Jesus not a living one. Or maybe the Resurrected Jesus was somehow transformed and looked different from the Jesus she had known. Whatever the reason, she doesn't know it's Jesus until he speaks her name. And then her world is completely changed. And Mary then goes to find the disciples where she announces to them, "I have seen the Lord!"

These multiple versions of the same story, with their subtle as well as their significant differences remind us that the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection are not to be read like a police report--as the facts and nothing but the facts. Rather, they are more like an impressionistic painting, depicting the event with an artistic touch, each with its own stylistic emphasis. But while there are indeed differences among these four accounts, all four offer the same essential message. All four offer the same perspective about God and God's activity in the world. And this resurrection perspective stands as a stark contrast to the perspective that swirls around us so much of our lives.

Mary Magdalene's world perspective was shaped by the grim, gritty, difficult world she lived in. It was shaped by the tyranny of the Roman oppressors who didn't hesitate to kill or torture those in their way. Her perspective of life was shaped by the grinding poverty of her people, by the suffering of her loved ones, by the greed and corruption of the leaders, by her own

inferior status as a woman, and by the sheer precariousness of life and the daily proximity of death. And most immediately, her world perspective was shaped by the tragedy she had just witnessed: the torture and death of her beloved friend on the cross. Life was filled with unending suffering and pain. That was the perspective of the world Mary was familiar with.

The daily news headlines today still ring out this same perspective. Another politician or corporate executive resigns due to misconduct and we shrug and say, "what else do we expect?" We see horrific photos of lifeless child-victims of gas attacks, and watch as a passenger gets dragged off a plane, bloodied by airline personnel, or read about a man walking into a school with a gun and killing people, and a certain perspective about the world seeps into our bones and our minds and our hearts. There is ugliness in our world. There is hardship and suffering. We know it personally too. Your boss doesn't appreciate you or your efforts. Your marriage falls apart amid hostility and bitterness. Your personal habits of eating and drinking and shopping have spun out of control. Just as you retire, you get a frightening diagnosis. And after awhile, a certain perspective gains the upper-hand in our minds and souls. This is what life has to offer, we think. This is what reality looks like. This is life. And it isn't pretty.

But that world perspective was shattered to pieces when Jesus spoke Mary's name and she had an up-close encounter with the Resurrection. She didn't see the Resurrection at first. She thought Jesus was the gardener. But then he spoke her name and she recognized him, and her perspective about the world changed. Death no longer was the inevitable victor. Ugliness and brokenness and sorrow were not the only reality at work in the world. Yes, they were there and they still are. But they are not the only players and they are not the strongest players. The God of life and the God of love is at work in this world. And God is stronger than all forms of death.

When Mary left the tomb and declared to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" she was proclaiming her new Easter perspective. Her statement, "I have seen the Lord!" becomes the very first Easter sermon. In this one sentence, Mary proclaims a new recognition that God's life-giving reality is at work in our lives and in our world. A new perspective about God and about life and about herself is formed.

Easter invites us to see and embrace the world from this new Resurrection perspective. The brokenness of this world is not how the world has to be. God's force for good, and God's force of love, and God's force of life are loose in our world. Only sometimes, we don't see it. Sometimes resurrection comes in such ordinary forms that, like Mary, we mistake it for the gardener, when in fact, it is the wondrous activity of our life-giving God. When two estranged family members begin to reconcile, however awkwardly, you and I can say, "I have seen the Lord!" When in the aftermath of South Africa's brutal policy of racial tyranny and injustice known as apartheid, that country held its Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which perpetrators of horrific atrocities were called to account for their actions but were also extended forgiveness, paving the way for a nation to begin to heal, in such a case, you and I can declare, "I have seen the Lord!" When a Christian community and a Muslim community reach out to one another in friendship and for greater understanding, we can proclaim "I have seen the Lord!" When month after month a volunteer faithfully makes the trek to a distant prison to visit the forgotten people, God's people, incarcerated behind those bars, we can declare, "I have seen the Lord!" When a police officer buys a pair of shoes for the homeless man he sees sitting barefoot on the street, we can proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" And when our loved ones die and leave

this world, we confront their death with grief but also with the promised joy of their homecoming as we proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!"

Six year old Alex Myteberi was very disturbed by a photo he saw. Alex saw a photo of a small Syrian boy, sitting bloodied and dazed in an ambulance after being pulled out of the rubble from his bombed out home. You may have seen that same photo, as it became quite famous and spread globally across the internet. The photo prompted six year old Alex to write a letter to then President Obama. He asked the President to please go and get that boy and bring him to his home in Scarsdale, NY. He told Obama that the President could park his car in the driveway and that he and his family would be waiting to welcome the little Syrian boy with balloons and flowers. Alex and his little sister would share their toys with him and would take him to birthday parties and teach him a new language. Alex wrote, "We will give him a family, and he will be our brother." And in the presence of such a spirit of love and generosity voiced by a child in a world of bombs and death and hate, you and I are prompted to declare, "I have seen the Lord!"

There are four gospel accounts of the Resurrection. But why should we stop with just four? Because your life is also an account of the Resurrection. Your life tells a story. But which story will it tell--which perspective will shape your life? Easter has come and it gives us a story to live and a story to tell, so that our lives will proclaim: "I have seen the Lord!"