

<Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I was dismayed, earlier this week, when I saw the news that a long dormant volcano had come back to life under the historic and majestic Edinburgh Castle in Scotland, sending a lava flow down into the historic and beautiful portions of the city center below it. And almost immediately following my dismay was concern for our youth trip there this summer, and I wondered how, exactly, such an event would disrupt our plans. And then, almost immediately following that, I was chagrined to realize that this news was breaking on Wednesday, which happened to be April 1, and also happened to be April Fool's Day. And as I mentally shook my head at myself, remembering how much I truly dislike that day each year, I leaned into the mentality of "I'll have to see it to believe it."

How many of you have had such an experience, when - upon hearing news of an event - you thought to yourself, "I'll believe it when I see it."? What have those occasions been like? Were they wrapped up in cautiously hopeful expectation, such as a positive pregnancy test to parents who have tried overlong for a child? Or perhaps the news was less than good, and your need to see it in order to believe it was tied intimately to a need to insulate and protect yourself from grief and dismay? Regardless, in today's world of enhanced and computer-generated imagery, the mindset of needing to truly see to believe - or it's cousin, "don't believe everything on the internet" - is all the more poignant. What have you needed to see in order to believe?

The disciples to whom Mary ran were very much in the frame of mind of needing to see for themselves in order to believe because the news was so potentially heartbreaking and disconcerting. The news she brought involved one who was so important to them and whom they already grieved losing, that they could not just take Mary's word for it. Even though Mary was trusted, and known to them, and would have no reason to come to them on this morning bearing false or exaggerated news, even though they had every reason to trust what Mary was informing them of, they had to see it for themselves. And perhaps none of us are surprised by this.

We have spent much time in John's gospel over these past weeks in Lent, and this is true as we look back even to Christmas Eve and the Christmas season, as well. And in all these readings I've begun to notice a theme which I had never really paid attention to before, and perhaps you've noticed it, as well: John talks an awful lot about seeing - sight restored to the blind, understanding granted to those who seek it, illumination brought to those who want to be more aware of God's presence. And along with this theme is the ongoing invitation: "come and see." On no fewer than three occasions we hear this invitation repeated: "come and see." John very much wants his audience, including us today, to have our eyes, our minds, and our hearts opened to see and recognize the fullness of who Jesus is, of what Jesus is doing, and of what is coming into being through him.

And now, even on Easter Sunday, on the culmination and realization of all that has been taught and shown and illuminated up to this point, we see the invitation - and the need for it - emphasized yet again. Mary, early on that third day since the crucifixion and burial, is going to the tomb. Where the other gospels have Mary traveling with other women, and going for the purpose of preparing Jesus' body, here in John Mary travels alone, and with no other purpose than needing to see the tomb. To be near the body of her Lord and friend. To see for herself, perhaps to remind herself that such a thing, as surreal as it might be, is still actually true

But what she finds instead simply throws all her thoughts into greater disarray and replaces them with one overriding question: 'where is he? Where have they taken him?'

So she runs and finds Peter and the "other disciple whom Jesus loved," and tells them the news: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

It is far from uncommon that, when we receive news which disquiets our souls, that we feel as if we do not know what to do until we have confirmed it for ourselves, with our own eyes. Which is what Peter and this other disciple now need to do. They run to the tomb, ahead of Mary who follows, and have to look for themselves, to see for themselves. The other disciple reaches the tomb first, sees that it's open, and stops there. Peter, however, runs right in and sees that Jesus' body is not there, though the grave cloths are. And then the other disciple looks in and, seeing the situation, believes. We are not told that he then believes in the resurrection; much more likely he believes for himself what Mary has told them. And then, having seen for themselves, Peter and the other disciple depart, not seeing Mary who remains there at the tomb.

And here's where John's gospel doubles-down on the theme of seeing with new eyes, and seeing the deeper truth of the matter. For after the disciples leave, Mary looks in and sees something else entirely: two angels, which were not visible to the disciples, but which now comfort Mary and remind her of the resurrection promise which is even now being realized. And then, if that reassurance were not enough, Mary encounters Jesus, without recognizing him, until he speaks to her and calls her by name. Then, she sees anew, and understands in full.

What do you see in this day? We bear witness to the resurrection, the miracle of life taking the primary role in the story of our world, the stories of our lives, against and even in the midst of death. We see the fullness of the resurrection to life and life abundant made tangible and manifest among us. This sight is the foundation for our story of faith. The story which continues again today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and next week. The story which takes root in our own stories. And the deeper those roots go, the more we see signs and evidence of the resurrection all around. The deeper those roots go, the more others are able to see that story embodied in our lives, inviting them to live into it, themselves.

What we see, what we bear witness to, is the fullness of life and living. It is the resurrection of life against the threat of death. We have seen the evidence of it, and we now bear witness to it, in this time and in all times. May you live anew as a resurrection people, for all the world to see. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*