

## ***Remembering . . . and Encountering***

**John 20:11-18**

**Sermon by Dan Schrock**

**April 16, 2017**

**Easter**

*"But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;<sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.<sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."<sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (NRSV)*

### I

About 25 years ago, my mother died. Her death affected me so much that for several months afterward, I was disoriented. I had trouble mentally focusing on things and spent more time than usual staring out the window, daydreaming, thinking about her, trying to imagine what life would be like without her. I also had one cold after another, and Jenny said it was grief making me sick.

Although my mother and I were very different from each other, we shared a peculiar connection. Perhaps we were connected in a peculiar way because we shared the same birthday. Perhaps our peculiar connection happened because I was the only child of nine pregnancies to come out of her womb alive. Maybe we were deeply connected because for the first 10 years of my life she was the parent who raised me. During that first decade, my father was too busy milking cows and raising crops, or going to college, or working the assembly line at Star Tank, to pay much attention to me. Mom was the parent I went to when I was hungry, or wanted to be held, or had an injury to fix, or wanted someone to read a story out loud, or wanted someone to play marbles with. Early in life, a unique connection was laid down with her that never went away.

So what would life be like for me now that our connection was severed? What did her death mean for me? I felt disoriented.

## II

It wasn't until my mother died that I began to understand an odd feature of the passion stories: during the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, his followers seem disoriented.

Their disorientation starts with the arrest. When the soldiers laid hands on Jesus and escorted him away in the first century equivalent of handcuffs, most of the male disciples fled into the darkness and disappeared for the next three days (Matt 26:56). Alone among the Twelve, Peter hung around for a while on the edge of the action, but when confronted about his relationship with Jesus, insisted up and down he had no connection to the man (Matt 26:69-75).

The disorientation continued after the resurrection. In Mark, the 3 women who brought spices to the tomb (Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome), fled the tomb in terror when they found out Jesus wasn't there (16:8). In Luke, two followers of Jesus who were traveling on the road to Emmaus were so bewildered by events that they didn't recognize the person who joined them on their walk (24:13-27). In John, Mary was so caught up in tears that she had no idea who this gardener was outside the tomb (20:11-15). A bit later in the same gospel, a bewildered Thomas flat-out refused to believe the tall tale that Jesus is supposedly alive again (20:24-25). And also in John, when a stranger showed up on the shoreline cooking a breakfast of bread and fish, 7 of the disciples, who had been fishing out on the lake, didn't realize it was Jesus (21:1-5).

Confusion and bewilderment characterize all these resurrection stories—and mind you, these are people who had spent a lot of time with Jesus. They knew him well. They had spent a lot of time with him. They had a peculiar connection to him. Even so, the reality of his death and their feelings of deep grief made it impossible for them to recognize him at first. They were simply too disoriented.

This is what grief does: it disorients us. You can see it in people who have lost something or someone precious to them. In our grief, we forget things more easily. We arrive at the grocery store and realize we forgot to bring our shopping list. We misplace our car keys or our phone. We feel at loose ends with ourselves. Suddenly the daily tasks of life seem harder to accomplish. The future we had envisioned for ourselves is now up for grabs. And we have a harder time seeing what or who is right in front of our faces, which seems to be precisely what happened to the followers of Jesus. Grief makes it harder for us to accurately see what's really going on around us.

### III

However, the followers of Jesus did not get stuck in disorientation. If you keep reading to the end of the resurrection stories, you'll discover that in every case Jesus broke through the disorientation. In every case, he did something to crack their shell of grief.

- For Cleopas and his friend in their humble home in Emmaus, it happened when the stranger take bread, blessed it, and broke it (Lk 24:30-35). Then they knew.
- For Mary, it was hearing the gardener speak her name (Jn 20:16). Then she realized.
- For Thomas, it was seeing the wounds on Jesus' wrists (Jn 20:26-29). Then he believed.
- For the seven fishermen on the Sea of Tiberias, it was catching so many fish they couldn't even pull the net back into the boat (Jn 21:6-14). Then they understood.

In each story, Jesus did something or said something to evoke in them a treasured memory of himself. The gestures of his hands, the tone and timbre of his voice, the sight of scars his skin, the smells of bread and fish roasting on a fire—these sensory experiences fired the synapses in their brains. The fog in their minds cleared away and in a flash they encountered Jesus once again. In each instance, Jesus helped his followers to remember

him and reconnect with him. At a basic level, the experience of Jesus' resurrection was partly about remembering. The resurrection helped people who had a peculiar and intimate connection with Jesus to remember him.

But that is not all. In the gospels, resurrection was also a live encounter with the living Jesus. Jesus was not merely a memory. No, he stood right in front of them, living, breathing, healed, whole, and victorious over the powers of death. Resurrection was therefore also about having communion with a living Jesus who now inhabits a new mode of existence.

I suggest that experiencing resurrection today will have the same two qualities for us. In moments when we feel disoriented and the resurrected life of Jesus comes near to us, we will first remember something unique about Jesus—his unswerving trust in God, his parables that fired our imagination, or his compassion for other people.

And secondly, in these resurrection moments we will also encounter the living Jesus. We might meet the living Jesus in deep prayer, or when the words of a scripture passage sink into our spirits. We might perceive him before us in the guise of a friend or in some act of service.

One of the places I meet the living Jesus is here in this sanctuary. After worshipping in this sanctuary for a decade and a half, the space itself has taken on an aura of the holy. I can sense the presence of Jesus almost as soon as I walk into the room, both when it has other people on Sunday mornings and also during the week when no one else is here. This presence is soft rather than hard, gentle rather than intense, and subtle rather than overt. But it's unmistakably here.

In his new mode of resurrected existence, Jesus continues to meet us. He is among us, around us, and in us. When we grieve and when we are glad, he is here. His presence persists through our modest successes and our spectacular failures. He presents himself to us at every moment.

One place Jesus presents himself to us is at this table of bread and cup. Let us prepare for communion.