

“I Have Seen the Lord!”

John 20:1-18

April 12, 2009, Easter Sunday

GR FUMC

About three months ago, in early January, I turned 50 years old. I know there are many of you in the congregation who saw 50 come and go awhile ago and you're thinking "Hah! Wait 'til she sees what's next!" And there are others of you for whom 50 is so far away that you're thinking that such an advanced age couldn't possibly apply to you. Hah! Wait 'til you see what's next!

Once or twice a year I clear enough time out of my calendar to participate in a special activity with the students at our partner school, the MLK Leadership Academy. This year, I joined the second graders on their spring field trip to the Grand Rapids Ballet. My two little charges were Diamonte and Amazjanae. As we were waiting in line to go to lunch, Diamonte turned around and asked, in that deceptively innocent way that 8 year olds have, "How old are you?"

"How old do you *think* I am?" I shot back.

He grinned. "Ninety-nine!"

"Nope, I'm 50."

Even though *he* was the one who suggested I was twice as old, Diamonte's eyes grew wide with genuine shock. "50! Whoa!" Either he'd never met someone so old, or he'd never met someone who admitted to it.

There are many disadvantages to beginning your sixth decade, but there are many advantages, too. For one thing, you've finally learned that you're really not in control and rolling with the punches works better than being knocked over by them. You've also

learned that, even though you're not in control, there is a basic rhythm to life, a pattern that you can get used to, even anticipate. Basically, you know what to expect from each day and not a lot can surprise you.

On the evening of my fiftieth birthday, we had a very nice dinner party at home. Both of our daughters were there and a couple of friends had come over to celebrate. The food was delicious, the conversation delightful – all just as we had planned. Dessert was about to be served when, contrary to all my expectations, the front door opened and in marched not one, not two, but more than a dozen church staff members, complete with balloons and cakes and lots of noise.

You know how it is when something really surprising bursts in on you: it takes awhile for your old brain to catch up with the new reality. I knew that my little dinner party wasn't my little dinner party anymore. But I wasn't quite sure what it had become. What were these people doing here? Didn't they know what day it was? Couldn't they see we were in the middle of dinner? The surprise was for me, but I was on auto-pilot, back in my old reality.

We don't know how old Mary of Magdala was when she got up early that Sunday morning. But clearly she was old enough to know what to expect from death. She knew that “when a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You don't wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can.” [Taylor]

That was all Mary was doing that morning -- paying her respects. According to John, she went by herself. Her teacher and mentor had been tortured and killed. She wanted to grieve awhile before doing what needed to be done, before she touched the

lifeless body of Jesus and honored it with the dignified treatment that the dead should receive. [Fairchild]

It was still dark, but even from a distance she knew something was wrong. She could smell damp earth, cold rock from inside. Someone had moved the stone! Mary was stunned, shocked. *Not* because she suddenly figured out what was going on; not because she remembered that Jesus said he would rise from the dead and at last she believed it. No, she was still living in the old reality. She was shocked and stunned because she believed that someone had stolen the body.

They must have been “afraid he would become a saint, afraid his tomb would become a shrine. Someone had taken him away--God knew where--to a steep cliff, to the town dump. His body was all she had left and now it too was gone.” [Taylor]

So she ran and brought two of the other disciples back with her. But once they had satisfied themselves with the truth of her claim, they seem oddly unaffected. They leave her in the cemetery, weeping. If they tried to bring her home with them, she must have refused to go. Her brain can't keep up. When John and the other disciple leave, she stays, rooted to the spot. The body of the one she loved is gone. She cannot even do what she had come to do, and now she doesn't have the least idea of what to do next.

Not even the appearance of angels could change her mind. When she looks inside the tomb a second time, there they are, two men in white, sitting where Jesus had lain. *Then* does Mary finally remember Jesus' promises? *Then* does she see that Jesus has broken the bonds of death and been raised to new life? She does not. Rather, when they ask her why she is crying - she says to them “Someone has taken the body of my Lord and I don't know where they have put it!”

Apparently it never occurred to Mary that the angels might be the culprits. But it was not as if she was thinking clearly. She was operating on auto-pilot, so that when she left the tomb she bumped into the gardener without even seeing him. His only value to her is that he might know the answer to her question. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." What did she think she would do--have the gardener lay the body over her shoulders? Or was she going to pick it up all by herself? It was not a reasonable request, but the gardener did not seem to mind. [Taylor]

Mary's dullness of mind seems foolish to us now, but let's admit it, we do the same thing, don't we? Most of us, most of the time, have already made up our minds about what God will or won't do. We wake up expecting to see the same world we saw the night before; we go to work, we run the errands, we get to the doctor's appointment, we eat dinner, we go to bed. We don't expect the trees to clap their hands or the stones to sing. We don't anticipate that there will be flowers on the table, or forgiveness on the lips of an enemy, or that or that the doctor will say 'I can't explain it, but the cancer is gone.'

We go to church on Sundays. We hear the message that Jesus proclaimed. We hear about the miracles he performs in other people's lives. But when it comes to our lives, especially the hard times in our lives – the times of trial, of loss, of mourning – it is oh so hard to believe that new life is here, that God reigns, that death does not have the last word.

We all know the story: he was raised from the dead on the third day. But when we look around, nothing looks like it's changed. It doesn't look like the resurrection has

made any difference. There's still violence, lying, cheating, exploitation. Saying that Jesus was raised from the dead has become part of the regular pattern of our lives, it's what's expected of us and what we expect of ourselves, it's the default mode. We're on auto-pilot; we don't really expect it to make a difference.

Brothers and sisters, if, this Easter morning, you are looking around and asking "but what's changed?" I am here to tell you that you are asking the wrong question. The right question is not "what's changed?" but "*who* changed?" "The heart and burden of the New Testament," says Rev. Peter Gomes, "is not that the world changed, but that ordinary men and women -- the most ordinary of whom were those men and women who followed Jesus, the ones who huddled at the foot of his cross, fled at his death, and were astonished when they discovered that he was alive again -- that these ordinary, bewildered, befuddled human beings, our ancestors, were changed from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

"They did not change the world but they themselves were changed, and thus was their attitude toward the world and all that was in it changed. They were no longer terrified of their shadows, frightened, or fearful of death. They were no longer in awe of people who had power and terror over them.

"Read about those apostles in the New Testament; read about what happens to them, about how they lived their lives, how they faced the world, how they astonished everyone who had known them before the resurrection. Can these be the same people who never understood one of Jesus' parables, who were always late, who were never at the right place at the right time, who denied him, who shivered at the foot of the cross,

who ran into the darkness, and who didn't even believe the good news when they first heard it? Could it be these same people who were now turning the world upside down?

“What happened to Mary on Easter morning? She had gone on a mission of mourning and mercy to attend to the body of Jesus, to anoint the body and to repair the damage done by the spears and nails on Friday, to wrap him up and give him a proper Jewish burial. She had gone to do the work that we now pay undertakers to do. What happened to her that morning? She became the first apostle” – the first witness to the living, resurrected Christ. The first bearer of the good news, the first evangelist. When Jesus was born it was the angels who were given the happy task of announcing the good news. But now, when Jesus is born again to resurrected life, the angels are replaced, according to John, by Mary. [Gomes] Ordinary, thick-headed, old-mindset, on auto-pilot Mary.

So the next questions are obvious: Will you allow yourself to be changed? Can you be surprised? Do you see the risen Lord? Theologian Marianne Sawicki defines the church as those people who recognize the risen Lord. The real church isn't the people who show up on Sunday, whether it's twice a year or every week. The true church is made up of those who have been given new vision, those who specialize in discerning the Risen One.

When we receive the new life that Christ offers, we begin to see Christ's presence everywhere, we see resurrection everywhere: in Creation and the creativity that is God's gift, in the eyes of a child, in the heart of an enemy. Injustices and wounds are recognized as signs of pain, but they are also seen as opportunities to participate in the risen Christ's healing and redemption of the world.

- In Egypt, the freed slaves saw armies advancing and saw no way out. But Moses and Miriam saw a way forward and plunged into the waters. What seemed to be certain death became a call to new life, as the escaped Hebrew slaves became God's people.
- In Judea, those who saw Jesus on the cross saw only death. Even those who saw the empty tomb failed to recognize its meaning. At first it looked only like additional sorrow added to what was already too much pain. But once they recognized the risen Lord, what looked like death turned out to be an opening for new life.

What new life have you missed, because, faced with an empty tomb, you assumed your mission was to look for dead bodies? Do we approach the difficult situations of our lives looking for a confirmation of our worst fears; or do we approach them looking for a confirmation of the glory and power of God? Do we go to the empty tombs of our lives on auto-pilot, assuming things are the way they always were? Or do we go with open eyes and hearts, to celebrate a victorious resurrection?

New life has come among us. That is the strange and wonderful news that Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles, bears to us now. And when we take that news in, we, like Mary's first hearers, will find ourselves sent forth to be known and make Jesus known in the breaking of the bread, the healing of the sick, the loving of the unlovable, the reconciliation of each of us to one another and to God in Christ.

Now that I am clearly in the second half of my life, I've been paying more attention to others who have lived long and well, trying to figure out how they do it. One

of the great 20th century figures in the western world was Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II. On his eightieth birthday, Churchill was having his photograph taken. When he was done, the photographer said courteously to the retired politician that he hoped he would photograph him on his hundredth. “I don’t see why not young man,” said Churchill, “you look reasonably fit to me.”

Churchill’s political career had been pronounced dead on several occasions, but he was a man who saw new life where others saw only death. That spirit was evident at his funeral service, held at St Paul’s Cathedral in London in 1965.

Churchill had planned his own funeral carefully. There were some of the great hymns, of course, and the historic liturgy of the Anglican Church. Those were to be expected, part of the pattern of death for a public figure that everyone was used to. The congregation was on auto-pilot. The benediction was spoken, as usual, and after it followed a long silence. A bugler high in the dome of the enormous cathedral sounded the familiar note of “Taps,” the classic military signal of the end of the day and the end of a life. Another silence followed. Then a second bugler, also high up in the dome, began to play “Reveille,” the signal of the beginning of a new day and a new life. [Butts]

Sisters and brothers in Christ, to be a Christian is to be a person of the second bugle, one who sees new life where others see only death, one who recognizes the Risen Christ where others see only an empty tomb.

Death is expected. Loss is part of the pattern. Grief is what we’re used to. But those stones have been rolled away this happy morning, revealing this amazing surprise: by the light of this day, God has planted new life in us that cannot be killed, and if we can

remember that then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.

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