

“The Gift of Seeing What’s There”
John 20:1-18
The Rev. Dr. Richard Topping
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What wonderful music today! I sat there and said Amen! And then, that's quite a move for a Presbyterian. Friends I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

As a younger man I guess i was about 18 or 19, I blustered my way into the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, with a couple of friends. We looked at the art. There's a great sea of sharpened pencils stuck into the wall where you come in thousands of them. There was a mattress on the second floor with a paper machete head under one corner, and the mattress kept rising and coming down again making a groaning sound.

And then there was this, a exhibit of a signboard from a church and at that week every ailment of the human condition had a meeting group at the church and then for Sunday the sermon was “Life is happy”. And paintings, contemporary paintings, colour without form or logic all splattered on the canvas. I was 19 and I thought finger painting. You remember in kindergarten working with gloves, that gooey mess right in the plastic backed paper with your apron on.

I really couldn't see what I was supposed to see there. There were no trees or no people or mountain or skies or animals and I turned to a friend, a young friend that I said, Jia “I could do that”, I guess a little too loudly. Our guide in a blue smock with a name tag Chicago Contemporary Museum of Art printed on it appeared, and she said Oh yes but, ‘you didn’t’. Didn't want I said, you didn't paint any of this.

Come with me and then she let us through the museum she she helped us with her greater knowledge see what we couldn't see turns out she was a contemporary artist. She we even saw some of her paintings in the museum we got an art appreciation class from her she took us over to a paragraph on the wall that said ‘art is an expression of the spirit of the times the lack of realism reflects social anomie we're getting into late modernity and early postmodernity it's a triumph of substance and form a greater emphasis on the world you construct inside your head and less on a pre-constructed world presented to the viewer fully assembled’.

I said, really? All that to say here's someone who, who taught me to see things I was blind to oh it was right there in front of all of our eyes all the time that woman didn't change the art, she changed us. Her words lay bare more reality than I had previously known up until that day, where contemporary art was concerned I was in the dark.

She helped me with my receptive deficit. Got me to see what was already there on the canvas in the world. Now why on earth would I tell you that story on an Easter Sunday

morning? I'm glad you asked! Early on the first day of the week, well! it was still dark so begins our gospel story this Easter. Think, Johnny loves to work a phrase he likes to tease out the non-literal sense of the term still dark while it means not much light outside twilight shadows early morning the said not yet dawn the whole worlds in shadows when it's still dark.

But still dark also means not much light inside lack of comprehension some dullness of failure to understand the not knowing it a kind of ignorance about what is really going on. When someone doesn't get it we say, 'he's in the dark'. On the first Easter morning Mary Magdalene is still in the dark. On Sunday the first day of the week resurrection day she still acting like its Good Friday.

Stark outside and it's dark inside. The day has yet to dawn understanding, is yet to come to Mary. Mary loves she loved Jesus she's a totally different person because Jesus loved her and so she makes that long sad walk to the graveyard the first day of the week. I suppose like some of us she visits the grave to get closest to the only place in the world where he is long sad walk that's what it is darkness still clings to the day.

She's gone first thing in the morning to make peace with death that's a hard phrase isn't it? Peace, death. Maybe visiting the tomb will help her get to closure work through her grief. horror of horrors stones rolled aside and the body is missing the darkness grows deeper here Mary saw but what Mary saw was the stone removed she saw the body missing.

Mary's conclusion 'they have taken the body'. The Romans can be rather thorough when they put down a movement you can't fight City Hall right imperial power wants to make it seem like none of it ever happened. The files are gone and the body is missing as though he never was. Mary has not a thought of resurrection. Mary has no inkling that God works well we sleep and so she runs and gets to disciples and mind this passage from the Bible, contains a lot of running around.

Mary runs a merry thong the events they set people on edge, panic them they put them into a kind of disoriented motion. Airy sprints for the disciples John and Peter, Peter and John. She doesn't bring them Easter hope, though she brings them panic. Death does that. I, I've noticed how death can yank our chain says people scurrying about running here and there.

And the story we read this morning the movement centres on corpse recovery Mary raises the same complaint three times in our gospel reading they've taken away the body of our Lord and I don't know where they put him. The disciples listened to Mary's report and then they hightail it to the tomb more frantic action no hope just fear. For Peter & John it's still dark too. There are still in the dark. What did Peter see? A napkin folded neatly and by itself linen shroud also folded and and that was it John arrived he looked he saw he believed says the gospel writer but what he believed was not that Jesus was raised nobody thought that the text goes on to say that they didn't know a thing about resurrection.

So having seen having believed that Jesus was dead but that the body had been stolen these two men bolted home and that as they say is that. But now the sun is a little higher in the sky it's still dark the disciples like Mary only know of one possibility their logic is faultless dead bodies do not disappear. Somebody's got to move them the world is a place of cause and effect rationality. We live by the laws of motion and mechanics they things happen as they always happened right! All science and human reasoning perception are based on the familiar only what has occurred, can occur. The rules for what we think and are allowed to believe are set in place.

Something weird right confronts our minds and we take it down to the scholarly Guild and we tried out the acceptable flat and down and deflated this worldly protocols for making sense of things. Don't worry folks! Nothing unusual here, go back to what you're doing, what we've got here is a stolen corpse, grave Roberts, we've seen this before, relax!

Reality gels and hardens there's nothing new under the sun been there done that we can explain this nothing more than and usually about this time of the year we get a series of skeptical scholars in 'Time, and Newsweek and Mcclane's', to tell us don't worry folks you're safe from God. Get the word out, dead people stay dead. It's painful but you've got to be realistic. Grief management is what it's about we're still in the dark.

Funny how what we can see depends a lot on what we already know. Hold fast to what you've always thought say to people I don't care what anybody says, I believe and it narrows your vision keeps you in the dark. Our ways of seeing things can be well government approved, business sponsored, peer driven, so that sometimes we stay in the dark about the rich wide world of mystery and meaning that is really there but that we can't see.

John Heywood said, 'there are none so blind as those who will not see'. I sometimes wonder if the great modern failing is it for all of our talk about open mindedness, and we suffer from an incredible lack of imagination and courage. We tend to be open minded about matters that other people are open minded about that's not courage that's like conformity.

Mary sits in the dark alone by the grave. Disciples of Jesus actually confirmed her in the bad news and they took the body so bolt the door. We could be next in fear clamps down on her in the dark world she inhabits. Mary stood weeping outside the tomb weeping is one of the ways we come to terms with things we reckon with the finality of circumstances weeping means sometimes we, we've adjusted to the real deal the dark reality that is served up.

Nut then, there's angels. All dressed up in white angels and as you can't see their angels blind grief again narrows and constricts the world she trots out the Good Friday story of defeat and by now she's getting pretty good at this story. They've taken away the body of our Lord and I do not know where they laid him at she even tells the story to

Jesus who she thinks the gardener before this is done. And she tells the story of ruin and defeat which is becoming a kind of story of her life that takes some reality denying gusto.

We can be like Mary right in the dark extorting sympathy by constantly telling our Good Friday stories of defeat to anyone who will listen. Have you ever notice how repetition of a bad story can become the story of your life they've taken away my family, they've taken away my position, have taken away my church, they've taken away my privileged place in the world, and I don't know where to find it.

And then and then it happens just when we thought that Mary and the disciples come out to the tomb to write one more chapter in the long sad story of death's ascendancy. One more episode and how the good always get it at the end, it happens. It's a still quiet moment. Didn't the psalmist say, 'be still know that I am God'. Mary sobs and the gardener who just happens to be working on Sunday, ask's her, what are you weeping about? Mary repeats her story of sadness and loss and ruin for a third time. That's all she can see. She's adjusted to death, lower your hopes, fit in, adjust.

And then, and then he says her name 'Mary' she knows who it is 'rabbi!' She's not in the dark now. With his presence in the world it's a different place. The darkness lifts the light dawns that it adds up differently now the stone rolled away the empty tomb, the folded clothes he's present the flatten down world of agnostic cause and effect, it cracks open God moves and acts in the world.

God raised Jesus from the dead God made a way where there wasn't a way he rises up from an empty grave. W.H Auden once said, "ours is an age of overwhelming. To be overwhelmed as to be in water, to be overwhelmed is to be underwater". I think that one of the main reasons we feel overwhelmed by our own circumstances by our griefs by our responsibility by the shape that the world is in is because well it's a struggle, to leave comfortable death behind, and believe that God acts in the world.

And it's such a struggle to learn a new story to tell when we're so practiced in the previous one. I think that's why church consists of so much repetition. A new picture a new narrative it takes awhile to get on your hard drive. Like Mary we reason naturally we imagine that we are the only players in our deflated flat world. Grief overwhelmed her she found the unhappy company of others who confirmed her into her unhappiness and finally she sat and lingered and the Lord the Lord risen from the dead and active in the world came to her called, her name.

Mary doesn't need to find a corpse or make herself into one by being fanatically busy. Jesus Christ the risen Lord came to her, when she finally stayed still for a minute. All of a sudden Jesus Christ transformed her shrunken little Good Friday it's all up to me world, into an Easter God is at work in the world. Dark overwhelming becomes full light of day, world transforming Easter worship in our story she says "I have seen the Lord."

And it changes everything about her. Now she goes now no messenger with glad tidings Jesus is alive in the world Jesus is up to things Jesus is bothering with the world it isn't all up to you and I we have our part to play but Jesus is always out there front of us leading us he's with us he's making the world over again this is our hope this is what inspires the church this is what fires us up for mission.

Believe, Jesus Christ is risen this Easter Sunday keep your eyes open for him sit still for just a minute and you'll get your name called and get awakened to the real world it's a new creation friends it's not dark anymore the stone is rolled away the tomb is empty the grave clothes are folded the son, SON came up today.

Friends Christ is risen. Thanks be to God, Amen!