

Have to Seen Him?

John 20:1-18

When I initially read this scripture and heard the words that Jesus gave Mary Magdalene to give to the disciples I remembered a song from the 70's called: *Have You Seen Her ?* It is about a man who has lost the one he loved and in his pain remembers how happy he was with her. His question to all is "have you seen her?" I remember this song because it is one of sadness and grief. That is indeed what the followers of Jesus had been experiencing when the dawn broke on that first Easter morning. They came to the tomb and found it empty and this initially only caused more confusion. However, by the end of our scripture we hear these words: ***"Mary Magdalene Went and Announced ... 'I Have Seen the Lord'" (v. 18).*** This is the first sermon. It is delivered by a woman. She saw and believed and announced. She did not require ordination or an accredited preaching course. She required only a word from Jesus. Then she went and told. Here is the message for us: Christ is risen—go tell someone. **Clayton J. Schmit**

John's Easter account begins with a lot of running. When Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty, she ran to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Her words, like the shot of the gun that begins a race, send the two disciples running to check it out for themselves. Not many of us are breathless this morning. Perhaps no one ran to get here—although some may race to get your favorite seat. Why did we all come? Did we come to hear something new, or to hear the old, old story once again? Is this just our Easter tradition, like a ham dinner after worship?

Swiss scholar Karl Barth said that what brings us to worship—on Easter or any day—is an unspoken question clinging to our hearts and minds, and that question is simply this: "Is it true?" Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that

God not only established the routine of the laws of nature, but that one day God broke the routine and somehow raised Jesus from the dead? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened on that morning that we can only rebuild our lives on its foundation? Is it true?

These are such powerful questions—and they are unavoidable on a day such as this. Sometimes we think that Easter is only for people who already believe and only to be undertaken after completing the introductory courses that deal with Jesus' life and teachings. Begin with the Sermon on the Mount. Marvel at Jesus' wisdom. Learn from him. Become fascinated by his life, fixed on his person. If we begin there, perhaps then we will be better prepared to hear this mysterious tale about Jesus rising from the dead.

It seems quite odd that we would flock to worship on Easter, of all days, a day on which we proclaim the very things that may be hardest to believe. However, it is clear from those who knew Jesus, from the apostles of the early church and from the authors of Scripture, that Easter is not the dramatic conclusion to the story for those who are able to follow it that far. Rather, Easter is the beginning.

Read the first sermons that were ever preached in the early church as recorded in Acts. They make no reference to Jesus' teachings. His earthly life receives scant attention. It is almost as if the story of his life is of interest only if we see it from the vantage point of Easter. Even Jesus' teachings are not seen as important in their own right, because there is little that is original in them. Rather, they take on meaning only when we take into full account who the teacher is, that is, God's chosen one who was to die and be rise again.

This is why the Gospels have been called Easter accounts with extended prologues. For the early followers of Jesus, the beginning point of Christian proclamation was the Easter event. Over and over the disciples started with

proclamations about Easter, as if it were the only place to begin. Through the centuries Christians have begun our journey of faith by running to the empty tomb. As modern people, who like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, we sometimes forget that the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be as difficult for these ancient people to believe as it is for us. These ancient people were not stupid. They had seen many people die and never once had they seen anyone come to life again.

Yes, there was something in the story to doubt. There is also another way to put it: there was something in the story that reached the deepest regions of our hearts and minds, where both doubt and faith are found. In the resurrection God gave us such a miracle of love and forgiveness that it is worthy of faith, and thus open to doubt. The very doubts we may hold attest to the scale and power of what we proclaim. So the place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things we never doubt. Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us. So we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.

Easter may be just the place for beginners, after all. The place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things that are beyond the reach of our doubt. Rather, perhaps we need to begin where the early church began, with the larger realities and deeper mysteries that are open to doubt, but are also large enough and deep enough to reveal something of God to us. That is the promise held out to us this day, the promise of Easter, which has throughout history been the occasion of the greatest doubt and also the source of the most profound faith. Perhaps we will find that the early church was right to begin just here, where the stakes are highest, risking doubt in order to claim a larger faith. Could it be that

one of the reasons we are here on a day such as this is that we long to swim in the depths of realities that are large enough to reveal God to us, where both the risk and the promise are that much greater?

The Easter message is that Jesus is risen and has "ascended to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Here we understand what John's Gospel said in the first chapter, that "the Word became flesh" (1:14) and that those who receive him and believe in his name will be given "power to become children of God" (1:12). The mercy and grace of God in Christ triumphs over all that would undo it. The new life manifest in resurrection is enduringly located in the heart of God. It is not new life that lives only to die another day. Instead it is new life that abides in God, and thus abides forever. **D. Cameron Murchison**

My prayer as you leave worship on this day, is that you have exchanged your question marks for exclamation points—but a question mark is a good and fitting place to begin. **Martin B. Copenhaver**

He is risen and we can now sing a new song: *Have You Seen Him?* Because **Mary Magdalene** ran from the empty tomb to tell what she observed – we believe! Because the disciples ran to the tomb and find no body – we believe! Because Mary encountered the risen Christ – we believe! Because Jesus told Mary to tell the disciples "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" – we believe! Because Mary said "I have seen the Lord" – we believe!

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