

Sunday – April 24, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **I Have Seen the Lord**

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Scripture: John 20:1-18

First a word about Mary Magdalene. She is the only person that all four gospels have at the tomb on that first Easter morning. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are other women with her. John has her there all by herself. Let me just say that it was very bold for the gospel-writers to mention that the first people to know about the resurrection were women. The word of a woman at that time was considered so unreliable, women were not allowed to be witnesses in court. For me, the fact that all the gospels say that women found the empty tomb, and then went to tell the male disciples, is evidence for the integrity of the gospels.

Back to Mary Magdalene, just for a minute: She was not a prostitute. You cannot find a shred of evidence in the Bible that would indicate that she was. That interpretation of her came later, and caught on and became the traditional understanding. But, the Bible does not say that. Her devotion to Jesus, as indicated by her presence at the cross and at the empty tomb, makes her a role model for us.

Mary saw the tomb was empty and immediately suspect tomb-robbers. Why else would the stone be rolled away, and the body missing? She reports this to Peter, then she disappears from the story for a few verses.

“The beloved disciple” or “the disciple Jesus loved” is traditionally identified with John, the brother of James, and traditionally considered to be the writer of the gospel. While Peter is all through the gospels, this disciple is present only in John’s gospel, and appears only at the Crucifixion, where Jesus gives him responsibility for his mother, with Peter at the tomb, and on the beach when the Risen Christ feeds his disciples. In that story, he is pictured following Jesus and Peter to the point that Peter becomes resentful. So, this unnamed disciple is with Peter running to the tomb. He looks in, but Peter *goes* in.

The fact that the grave clothes are still in the tomb would suggest that the body was not taken by grave-robbers. They would not have taken the time to

unwrap the body before making off with it. So, this addresses Mary's original misunderstanding.

After the two men leave, Mary Magdalene returns as her story resumes. The gospel says three times that she weeps, recalling for us Jesus' words in John 16:20, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice," and sets the stage for Jesus' promise in John 16:22, "So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Mary then has a personal experience with the Risen Christ, who calls her by name, and sends her to tell the disciples to tell them he had been raised, and was ascending to his Father and their Father.

The resurrection, which we celebrate every Easter, is not the end of the story. It's not a happy ending to a tragic tale. It is not a conclusion of any kind. The resurrection takes everything that went before and launches it on a higher, more powerful, more exciting trajectory. Jesus has defeated death, but that's not the end. He's saying, "Look where we can go now!" We'll sing in Christ the Lord is Risen Today, "Ours the cross, the grave, *the skies.*"

Everything in the Bible story has led up to this. The Old Testament points to the coming Messiah. Jesus is that Messiah. Then, his life and teachings lay the foundation. His arrest, torture and crucifixion build on that foundation. Then, the resurrection blows the roof off the joint, he ascends into heaven, makes a few final earthly appearances, then sends down the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the Church explodes from a dozen men to over 3,000 people in a single day.

And here we are today, a Church of over 2 billion souls. How did that happen? Are we here 2,000 years later because of the Bible? No. Is it because of our ministry? Missions? Meaningful worship? Fellowship? No, no, no and no.

The Church is here in 2011 because it is possible to have a deep and meaningful relationship with the Risen Christ. This relationship is available to every human being around the world.

Consider this: You cannot have a personal relationship with George Washington or Robert E. Lee, for instance. You can read all the books you

can find on them, or watch the History Channel non-stop, and you will learn a lot about them. But you will never have a personal relationship with them because, to put it bluntly, they're dead.

Let's assume they are in heaven, where all good Virginians go. And Christ is in heaven, too. But, he's not stuck in heaven. He is also right here, right now. He is within us and among us. He is closer to us than our own breath. There has never been anyone else like that.

Easter is about Christ's love for us because the resurrection is about Christ's love for us. Holy Communion is also about Christ's love for us. Everything good, everything holy, is about Christ's love for us. Everything he taught and demonstrated about God's love is about his love for us. Now, the ball is in our court. "We love because he first loved us." (I John 4:19)

The question that leaves us with is: How do we respond to that love? How do we show Christ how much we love him in return?

That's easy. He tells us over and over. Love God. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Love your enemy. Love one another (meaning specifically fellow church members).

And, that's it. Everything else we do as Christians must come out of that call, that commandment to love before and above everything else. If we consider doing something that's not loving, we need to reconsider. We need to re-evaluate in the light of everything Christ has taught us. This will change what we do in our everyday lives. It will change who we are. And it will change the world.

Don't we know the world needs changing?