

The Very 1st Easter Sermon: "I Have Seen the Lord!"
Sermon on John 20:1-18 (4/18 & 4/19/15; *It's Still Easter* series)
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I love the Bible. I must admit I often do not read the *Bible* with the same voracity I have when I'm reading a faith memoir or a murder mystery...but I *love* the Bible.

It's not always a "page-turner," though parts of it *are* definitely exciting and do create a sense of eager anticipation. But the Bible isn't meant to be loved because of its action-packed narratives or its witty dialogue. (Though the Bible *also* includes its fair share of action-packed narratives and even some witty dialogue!)

I love the Bible because, through it, God changed my life. And, through its stories, wisdom, and challenging words, God *continues* to use the Bible to change my life – day after day, year after year.

We read and study the Bible because it contains the stories of Christian faith. The Bible communicates God's presence *in* and love *for* creation from the beginning of time.

As a preacher, every time I preach a sermon I have the opportunity to help make the Bible come to life for people in new and different ways. It's an opportunity I do not take lightly and, even on weeks when the writing is like pulling teeth, I am intensely grateful for the opportunity to stand before you, offering this holy work.

I *love* the Bible and I *love* the many ways in which I get to teach about it through my job as a pastor. Over the last 10 months, while I've been getting to know McCabe Church, I've learned with delight that so many of you, too, love the Bible – and that so many of you are actively engaged in learning its stories and growing in your relationship with God through the study of Scripture.

And we offer some great opportunities for Bible study through McCabe! From our Jesus and Me children's program, to our Great Adventures for elementary school kids, to Confirmation and youth groups, to our S.A.Y. Yes program for Will-Moore school children, to weekly Bible studies for grown-ups, to the daily 15-minute Family Link experience we recommend: there are so many ways to grow in your knowledge of the Bible through McCabe.

And it's a great thing for Christians to engage in Bible study throughout our lives. Actually, it's more than a *great* thing: it's a *necessary* thing. The Bible is the foundational book of our faith; from it, we learn about God's relationship with creation and with human beings over time...and, of course, the Bible is where we find the stories of Jesus – God revealed among us in flesh and blood.

Reading the Bible, and being open to the gracious and challenging words contained within it, is essential if we want to experience the fullness of God's presence in our lives. Reading the Bible is essential if we want to grow in our love of God and in our service to God's world.

But...reading the Bible isn't always easy. There are strange words, strange stories, and there are even parts we wish weren't in there.

In fact, the summer after I graduated from high school, I came face-to-face with some verses in the Bible I had no clue were in there. Before I tell you which verses those were, let me give you a little context.

On and off for years during my adolescence, I'd heard a tiny voice nudging me to think about pastoral ministry. Then, the summer after I graduated from high school I was on a mission trip with my church youth group and, on that trip, the tiny voice got much bigger and began practically shouting into my mind and heart.

So I talked it over with my youth pastor, I received some confirmation from my fellow youth that they could definitely see me as a pastor, and I decided that was it. When we returned home after the trip, I told my parents and began telling others that God was calling me to become a pastor in The United Methodist Church. I was so excited!

I even told one of my very good high school friends with whom I'd had many conversations about Christian faith. Well, "conversations" might be putting it a bit mildly: we had debates.

This friend was part of a different denomination and we believed some very different things. But that didn't stop us from being good friends or from talking about that on which we disagreed.

Other than friends from my own church youth group, this friend of mine was really the only other friend I had with whom I ever talked about matters of Christian faith. So I assumed she would be *thrilled* to hear that God was calling me to become a pastor!

But I was wrong. *Very* wrong.

She was already off to college halfway across the country when I decided to tell her about this calling God had placed on my life, so I wrote her a letter. I don't remember how long it was before she sent her response...but, when she did, I was devastated.

In her reply letter, she quoted 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 which reads as follows:

“When God's people meet in church, the women must not be allowed to speak. They must keep quiet and listen ... If there is something they want to know, they can ask their husbands when they get home. It is disgraceful for women to speak in church.” After quoting these verses, my friend then told me that pursuing a career as a pastor was a path that would lead me to hell.

As you might imagine, I got a bit upset when I read this letter. Not only did I feel like my friend had betrayed me by not supporting this new calling I'd discovered, I also felt like the *Bible* itself had betrayed me. How dare it contain words about women keeping silent in church! That's just not fair! What was I supposed to do with such information???

Well, as it turns out, I later learned that at least part of the reason St. Paul included those words in 1 Corinthians 14 is that the Corinthian church was having trouble with women literally being noisy during church. They didn't understand what was being taught, so they voiced their questions in the middle of the worship service.

Apparently St. Paul got wind of this issue and his advice was to tell the ladies to keep their mouths shut during church and to ask their husbands for clarification when they got home. (I'm not sure what single women and widows were supposed to do if *they* had questions...)

Knowing the context of those unfortunate words in 1 Corinthians 14 helped me come to peace with their existence. It didn't help me come to peace with my friend, however. I mean, she thought I was going to go to hell if I became a pastor...that kind of thing puts some strain on a friendship!

Unfortunately, the verses my friend told me about are not the only verses in the Bible that say difficult things about women in the church. It was painful when I learned such verses were in the Bible. Quite frankly, it remains a bit painful to this day.

However, there are *other* verses – other stories – in the Bible that trump the more painful ones about women keeping silent. Today's story from John chapter 20 is at the top of the list of Bible stories that *trump* any other words about women and where they should or should not be within the life of the church.

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Though I didn't get it noted in the bulletin, our sermon series for the next 4 weeks is called “It's Still Easter!” See, while Easter is a day every year, it is also a 50-day church *season* that begins on Easter Sunday and lasts until the day of Pentecost.

So, during this Easter season, we're going to explore more of the Easter stories.

Through each story, we will be reminded of Christ's constant presence with us...and we will be reminded of the hope we find in his death and resurrection. For today, we're back on that first Easter morning.

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When I have the opportunity to teach about the biblical stories of Easter morning, it's fun to help people discover that the four gospels tell the story a bit differently.

In the Gospel of Matthew, *two* women went to the tomb that first Easter morning: Mary Magdalene and, according to Matthew, "the other Mary." In the Gospel of Mark, *three* women went to the tomb:

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. In the Gospel of Luke *at least* three women were there that first Easter: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, "and the others with them" – though Luke doesn't tell us how many "others" there actually were.

In today's Easter story from John, there was only *one* woman who went to the tomb: Mary Magdalene. She is the constant in each of the Easter stories. So, whoever else may have been there, we have no doubt Mary Magdalene was there.

And, as I said during my sermon on Easter Sunday weekend, regardless of who exactly was there, it was women who were the first to go to the tomb that first Easter morning – a fact in which my fellow women preachers and I find grace, welcome, and challenge.

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A couple of weeks ago I was scrolling through my Twitter feed and someone I follow had tweeted a quote by a Christian thinker and writer named Jürgen Moltmann. The quote was this:

"Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection." Let that marinate as we think through John 20:1-18. "*Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.*"

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In today's story from John 20, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early Sunday morning and found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb and that Jesus' body was not there.

She ran to where the disciples were and told them someone had taken Jesus' body. Peter and one of the other disciples then ran to the tomb and did their own exploring...only to leave bewildered. But Mary stayed at the tomb weeping.

She just couldn't seem to leave knowing that was where Jesus was *supposed* to be.

While she was crying, she looked into the tomb and saw two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been.

One of the angels looked at her and asked her why she was crying. "They have taken away my Lord's body! I don't know where they have put him." Can you imagine? What terrible confusion.

After crying out to the angels, she turned away from the tomb and saw a man standing there; she supposed he was the gardener. "Why are you crying?" he asked her. "Who are you looking for?"

"Sir," Mary replied, "if you have taken his body away, please tell me so I can go and get him." She was grief-stricken. Desperate. And then the gardener called her by name. "Mary," he said.

When he called her by name, that's when Mary knew he was no gardener. "Rabboni!" she exclaimed.

Jesus had been her teacher, he had been her rabbi. He had welcomed her as one of his very own – as one who was worthy of his time, worthy of his healing grace...and, now, *she* was worthy to be the first witness to his resurrection.

I imagine she fell at Jesus' feet in that moment and I imagine she could have stayed there with him in that garden forever. But she couldn't stay there. Jesus needed her to go and tell.

"Don't hold onto me," Jesus said to Mary. "I have not yet ascended to my Father. But [go and] tell my disciples I am going to the one who is my Father and my God, as well as your Father and your God."

Jesus told her to go and tell, so she did. "I have seen the Lord!" Mary proclaimed to the disciples. And, with those five words, the first Easter sermon was preached.

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"Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection."
So said Jürgen Moltmann, anyway.

Now. If the women hadn't said something, do I think God would have found another way to get the word out about Jesus' resurrection? Of course I do. Of *course*. God would *not* have let Jesus' resurrection from the dead remain a secret.

And, of course, plenty of *men* went on to preach and teach about Jesus. But, because women seem to be dismissed or devalued elsewhere in the Bible, I am so grateful it was *women* who were the first witnesses *to* – and the first preachers *of* – Jesus' resurrection.

Do you know what's even better, though? What's even better is that the very first Easter sermon we have on record was so simple.

Mary Magdalene shared the good news about Jesus Christ in five words that are extremely easy to understand: "I have seen the Lord!"

And this simple sermon is perhaps the best kind there is – the kind of sermon we are *all* called to preach...the kind of sermon we are all *equipped* to preach. //

The sermon Mary Magdalene gave that first Easter morning did not require a college degree or seminary training. It didn't require excellent communication skills or a fancy pulpit. It didn't require meaningful warm-up with choirs or praise bands – as much as we love those things!

No. What was required for that very first Easter sermon was two things, and two things only: a powerful experience with the living Lord Jesus Christ and a willingness to tell others about it.

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As we prepared for Easter during the 40-day season of Lent, here at McCabe we experienced a sermon series called "I'm Not Okay." In this series we thought about many of the ways in which we struggle in this life: temptation...doubt...sickness...worry...judgmentalism...grief.

During Lent, we thought through those human struggles and we were reminded that, when we are not okay, God *is* at work and God *will* make things okay – eventually. Which reminds me of my favorite quote about Easter...this one by pastor and writer Frederick Buechner:

He said, "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing."

(In a sermon about women preachers, I've chosen to quote two men. Go figure! But it's not *really* a sermon about women preachers. It's just an Easter sermon about another Easter sermon 2,000 years ago that happened to have been preached by a woman – Mary Magdalene exclaiming, "I have seen the Lord!")

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"Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing."

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The resurrected Christ saw Mary near that garden tomb – he saw her weeping, he saw her grief and her fear – he saw Mary near that tomb and *he called her name*. He knew her struggles and he called out to her in the midst of them. The same is true for each of us.

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Mary had learned without a doubt that the *worst* thing – Jesus' violent death on the cross – had not, in fact, been the last thing. And *that* is the good news about resurrection. *That* is the good news about Easter. Always.

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Incidentally, almost 15 years after my friend sent me that hurtful letter, and after I had responded back to her in what I'm sure was a rather immature way, she found me on Facebook and, in a written message, she apologized for how she had treated me. Her apology was beautifully sincere. As I read her words, I was stunned, humbled, and grateful.

This experience with my friend back in high school was certainly not the worst thing I've ever experienced, but it was pretty awful at the time...and God worked to redeem it, to make it okay. But it took 15 years! Time *can* heal many wounds – if you open yourself to the healing God works to offer in that time.

See, God *is* always working to bring healing...to bring strength in times of great need...to make things okay...to remind us that the *worst* thing is never the last thing.

And when you discover this to be true, take a cue from Mary Magdalene. Go and tell others about it. Let them know how the living Lord appeared in your life. Because those sermons are the simplest and the best. Happy Easter. Alleluia! Amen.