

*I ask your prayers for all who seek God or a deeper knowledge of God.
Pray that they may find and be found by God. (BCP 386)*

Each year for nearly two decades now, I have prepared high school students for Confirmation. I find myself praying some version of this prayer for each of them over the course of the year we spend together. At a time in their lives when they are beginning to claim their own identity and independence and ideas, we ask them to say yes to their parents’ faith. Of course I know that it isn’t ultimately their parents’ faith but Baptismal faith, the faith of the saints that has been handed down for two thousand years. But it still takes time for them to sort it all out. I also know both as priest and parent, that there are lots of practical reasons we choose sophomore year for this, and when all is said and done it is still probably the best time to do this. But that doesn’t mean that navigating one’s way to a more adult faith is easy, and no one should pretend that it is. The truth is that faith cannot mature without seeking understanding; yet if we dare to seek understanding that process will always begin with questions and even doubt. It’s part of the deal.

In the meantime, I think it is the responsibility of a congregation like this one to “hold” the faith by being a place of wonder and inclusion and love and acceptance, with God’s help, as each person here, young and old alike, finds her or his way path to God. The way forward, in my experience, comes when we discover that it is alright to both affirm faith *and* to question it. Perhaps the most truthful claim any of us can ever make, especially on Easter morning, is “I believe; help my unbelief.”

I wonder if Easter morning isn’t harder for people who are questioning their faith than Christmas Eve? Everybody knows about birth. Even if you aren’t sure who Jesus’ daddy is, you can still sing those carols in December and celebrate silent and holy nights and birth and that beautiful child. I’m not saying that is all that Christmas means; only that there is an access point. But Easter remains a great mystery: what does it really mean to say that someone died and was raised again? What does it mean to say that this man’s living and dying frees us to be alive to God? I think that Easter faith begins not by offering easy answers to such questions but to love the questions and ultimately to allow them to lead us to a deeper truth. Perhaps the best place to begin is by being honest that there is not a cookie-cutter path offered in the Bible to Easter faith; no single formula for embracing the Paschal mystery. For me it is helpful to notice that the gospels give us a variety of narratives and not one simple formula. In fact, John’s Gospel gives us no less than five different Easter encounters, two of which we heard this morning:

- (1) The story of the Beloved Disciple running into the empty tomb: the narrator tells us that “when he went in, he saw, and believed.”
- (2) The story of Mary Magdalene’s encounter with a man she believes at first to be the gardener, until he speaks her name and she knows it is him.

On the heels of these two stories, we’ll hear next weekend about good old “doubting” Thomas, whom I’d rather call “seeing-is-believing” Thomas or “me-too” Thomas. He just wants the same chance to see and touch and experience Christ first-hand as alive that the others got. Then there will be the disciples back on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, who experience Christ by a charcoal fire at breakfast. And of course Peter, who later that same morning is asked three times: “Peter, do you love me?” Three times because, well you all remember why it is that Jesus has to ask him three times. And then, I love this, John’s Gospel ends by saying something along these lines:

There are so many other stories I could tell you, the world itself could not contain all the books that would be written if I did: but hopefully these are enough so that you might find and be found by God.

Beyond John, there are additional stories in the synoptic gospels. My personal favorite is found in the Gospel of Luke, on the evening of this very day, on the road to Emmaus. The disciples experience Christ “in the breaking of the bread”—which suggests to me that they must have been Episcopalians. My point is simply that each of the disciples had to discover the meaning of Easter in their own time, and the gospels seem to be making the point that there is not one right way to Easter faith. The two vignettes that we get today may or may not speak to you where you are; but since Easter takes fifty days to unpack and not just one, stay tuned because there is lots more to come as the journey toward Pentecost continues.

As for the two narratives we do get this morning, remember that the fourth gospel writer is sometimes called “the beloved disciple.” It is, in other words, our *narrator* who is racing St. Peter to the empty tomb this morning. He tells us that:

- Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark, and when she saw that the stone had been removed, she ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple.
- When she reached them, she tells them that someone has stolen Jesus’ corpse from the tomb, and she doesn’t know where they have laid him. She had come, remember, to anoint a body that is now missing;
- This causes the boys to race back to the empty tomb. Now the narrator wants us to be clear that he can run faster than Peter; that he made it there first, which I think is simply evidence that men haven’t changed very much in two thousand years. Here he is in the most important moment in his life and he has to say, “just so you know, I can outrun Pete. *But he didn’t go in.* He waits for Peter, who *finally* arrives, and then Peter goes in first and sees the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. When the beloved disciple does go in, the text says: *he saw and he believed.*

Now that is pretty sparse! All he sees is an empty tomb and some linens! And I imagine that if twenty or even a hundred people had a chance to peer into that empty tomb that they wouldn’t all come out believing. So far, at least: no angels, no announcements, no visions, no encounter with the risen Christ. It’s not a lot to go on! Still, somehow, the beloved disciple believes because, well...*because he believes.* Call it intuition or a sixth sense. Call it the work of the Holy Spirit or a gift. He doesn’t get proof or evidence and yet, somehow, *he just knows.*

Next week when we hear about Thomas, I think it’s fair to say that what he says is that seeing-is-believing. He can’t get to faith without an opportunity to see Jesus himself. But the Beloved Disciple’s experience seems to suggest the exact opposite for him: believing-is-seeing. And I imagine that as he tells the story years later to his children and his grandchildren, some of them highly educated in the ways of Greek philosophy, that they would further interrogate him, maybe even think him a bit of a simple man. But how, Dad? How Grandpa? How did you know? And I imagine him smiling and saying: *I really can’t say. I just did. I knew it more certainly than anything else I’d ever seen with my own eyes. I knew in that moment that life was changed, not ended; and not just for him but for me. And everything was different after that. I mean everything.*

I hope you all realize that there is no Biblical evidence for calling Mary Magdalene a prostitute, or even suggesting that she was somehow a worse sinner than any of the other disciples. The seeds of that mistaken claim may be in the Gospels themselves; some would say that there was a bit of a power struggle and the male disciples wanted to discredit Mary because they were jealous of her. Which is pretty sad, but if you’ve been around the Church a while then you know that we are not immune from petty grievances and sexism and making stuff up about people. But things came to a new low for poor Mary under Gregory the Great, who as one of my friends said this week, was a great liturgist and maybe even a great pope, but a lousy Biblical scholar. He’s the one who conflated a whole bunch of different stories and started saying that Mary Magdalene was an ex-hooker. But let me repeat: that’s not in the Bible. That doesn’t make Dan Brown right; it just means there are some gaps.

Here is what we heard proclaimed this morning in John’s gospel: *Mary Magdalene is the apostle to the apostles; she’s a preacher-woman.* You don’t have to be a card-carrying feminist to give credit where credit is due. All four gospels have her at the empty tomb on Easter morning as an eye-witness, even if some of the men at first think it’s all an “idle tale.” She is the one who discovers the stone has been rolled away. She is the one who sees and runs and tells. But what interests me even more is what comes next. The narrator seems to forget about her during that whole dance between Peter and the beloved disciple. But when he finally turns his attention back to her, she’s crying. That is a pretty normal thing to do when people we love die. She still believes that they’ve taken her Lord away, and the reality of his death is sinking in and now. But in the midst of her grief, in a conversation with the Gardener (because she doesn’t see through all the tears who he really is) she hears her name. She hears an old friend’s voice, and suddenly, like the beloved disciple, she knows now too. Christ calls her name, and her Easter faith begins.

When someone we love dies we are in a thin place, a vulnerable place. Freud might call it wishful thinking, but my experience as a parish priest suggests something much deeper is going on. When we confront the death of a loved one, we are open in ways that we are not usually open. At the grave, or in the quiet days that follow the death of a loved one, our faith may deepen and we may experience a sense of peace and hope and even joy, and know from what we see and hear with our own eyes that Christ is alive. Even at the grave we begin to sing: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.* There are no guarantees here either; sometimes the death of a loved one leads us to despair and doubt. But it can also open us up to find and be found by God.

Two different journeys toward one reality. Christ is alive. Death has been vanquished. We don’t have to live in fear. I think that we sing these songs of Christ’s victory over sin and death today as a way of proclaiming that we believe, even as we ask God to help our unbelief. We sing these songs in order to hold a faith that is full of wonder and love. We should be patient with one another as we find our way. But wherever we are in the journey, we are invited to share in the Feast and to taste and see that the Lord is good. May Christ be made known to us on this day in the breaking of the bread. And may each of us find and be found by God, not only on this Easter morning, but in the days to come, until by God’s grace through faith, we live more fully into our call to become God’s Easter people.