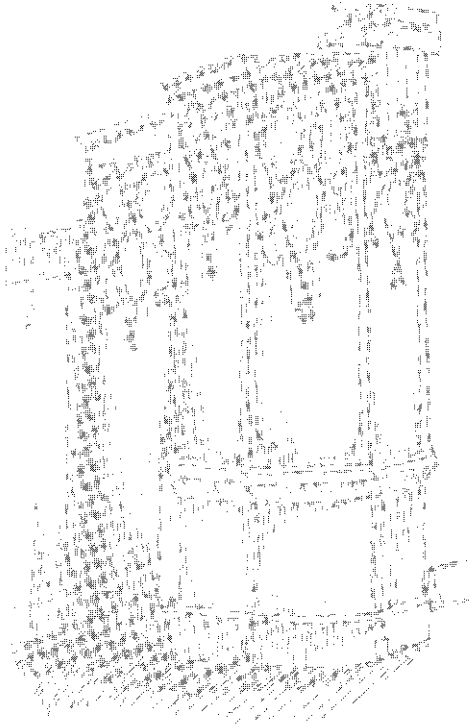


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A Theology For Lent and Easter - 1976

Part III: "The First Easter Sermon:
'I Have Seen The Lord.'"



Text: "Mary Magdalene
went and said to the
Disciples, 'I have seen
the Lord.'"

John 20:18

Easter Sunday
April 18, 1976

Rev. Richard M. Cromie
Southminster Presbyterian Church
Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania

Had it not been for that first Easter morning, the Church would not have come to be, and you and I would not be here today. Had it not been for that first Easter morning, our modern civilization with its good and glorious benefits and blessings, would not have come to be, and the world would be a poorer place indeed. Had it not been for that first Easter morning, there would have been no resurrection of the fallen hopes of his disciples, and the pilgrimage to human decency would have tumbled into a deeper dark abyss. Had it not been for that first Easter morning, there would be a weaker call for glory, a softer demand for love, less encouragement to beauty, and no response of hope in the ennui of our times. There would have been no Schweitzer, no Churchill, no Charlemagne, and no Magna Charta; no Plymouth Rock, no Marshall Plan; no Calvin, Knox, or Luther; no Beethoven, Bach, or Brahms.

If it had not been for that first Easter morning, the ordinary common man would have been left with all his ordinary dreams. There would have been no end to slavery; no call for human valour; no hope of everlasting life; no certain sign that God can be victorious over what destroys and tarnishes the Imago Dei image within us all. The impetus to move outside ourselves, the impetus to care for others, the impetus to make the world a better place, the impetus to struggle on against stupendous odds, the impetus to rise again after life and all our aching hopes have plummeted down the chasm to the bottom; that and so much more would not be here, had it not been for that first Easter morning. It matters not what details of the story impress you or alarm you in that event nineteen hundred forty nine

years ago - the turning point and center; the fulcrum and the lever and the Archimedes place to stand, were met together there. And the world was moved for good....up to a higher level....on that first Easter morning.

This has been our Holy Week, so rich and full of worship and, though sparsely armed with all the details, I think we know enough about the week. We know enough about Palm Sunday, even if we have never ridden in procession on the back of ancient donkeys. We know enough already about parades and how the world bestows its transient honors - King or Queen for a day, or two, as long as it is convenient. And then they come and say hop down, the palms belong to someone else. We all know about the transitory victories where we feel on top of it and revel in it, and then suddenly, as with things like movie stars and idols on the sporting fields and company presidents and beautiful young women and sixty-five year old anybodies; well, you know the rest. So passes away the Glory of the world. "Sic transit gloria mundi" is the way they used to say it when the emperor was marched to town in Rome, even in his greatest victories. Right above his head was a sign declaring that the glories of the day end much too soon. We know enough about Palm Sunday, and how they crowned our Lord.....My question here today.....is whether we know enough.....about the Easter morning.

We know enough about the Maundy Thursday, too; how those times come when we are afraid and lonely, when our friends all let us down and when we wander off into all the private gardens of our lives to weep so that no one else will see the tears. We know what it is like to feel the pressure of events. We know what it is like to fail. We know what it is like to be put upon by other people and be betrayed,

even with a kiss. We know enough about Maundy Thursday evening already...My question here this morning is whether we know enough about an Easter morning.

And, oh dearie me, we know too much already about Good Friday, and all other Fridays when violence rules the day, and good men die for nothing, and shouting silences a life-long love. Even the young among us here know how to weep. All of us experience, each in his and her own time, what it is like to watch one you know and love be taken from the world. We know about the thundering heavens and the people all around that are so wrapped up in themselves that they seldom understand. We know enough about the valleys, really; how private and personal and public they become. We know enough about defeat. We know enough about Good Fridays. My question, friends, is whether you and I could dare to boast that we know enough about an Easter morning. And, really, that is the message that we need and it really rushes in upon you. Into the middle of our days comes this tiny little sermon from Mary Magdalene: the first, the strongest, sweetest, fullest, greatest, happiest, shortest Easter sermon that anyone has ever heard.

It really was that simple: Mary went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." That is overpowering is you catch it at its heart, and it will change your life.

First of all, Mary Magdalene was preaching about something that she knew firsthand. You can almost always tell if one who is speaking has experienced the event he is speaking of firsthand. The pulpit is an open place where more than words are seen. That is the reason some are dry

and professorial in relating this dynamic news. For the truth of God must come to persons. One cannot speak with authority and force about a happening that he has never seen. Mary had discovered it and was simply saying what she knew. All the highfalutin arguments cannot change the power of that simple truth. Solzhenitsyn said the other day that a simple truth is more powerful than all the armies of the world. That is the first thing I want you to remember: the truth of God must belong to you. You cannot borrow on another's faith!

William Gibson, in his brilliant novel, A Mass for the Dead, wrote of the time when out of curiosity one day he picked up his late mother's gold-rimmed spectacles and her faded dog-eared Bible. He sat down in what was once her favorite chair. He placed her tiny spectacles on his nose and tried to see what she must have seen in that book. He reached, in desperation, for some slender thread of her faith, once so alive, so real, so meaningful. But Gibson writes, he could not recapture it and felt as silly as he must have looked in her tiny ancient spectacles, then came to the realization that his dead mother's faith could not be recaptured. Each person must discover an individual faith. That is the way it always was, and ever will be. All sermons should say that to you.

Our first comment is, "I have seen the Lord." Now secondly, shift the accent and the emphasis. Make it read: "I have seen the Lord." It was Father Teilhard, in the midst of all his heavy paleontology and philosophy, who caught it one day so explicitly when he wrote about seeing. "To see," he writes, "we might say that the whole of life lies in that one verb. To see or to perish, is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe."

It was true in the rugged jungle, when you had to be able to see to escape with your life. It was true in the time of Abraham when you had to be able to see up through the valley which God commanded him to enter. It was true at the time of the exile, when they had to see through the captivity of Babylon to the return home which God had promised. It was true when Herod's fiendish men were slaughtering their way through the cities of Judah, trying to find the new born King. It was true all through the agony of that terrifying scene on Friday afternoon at Golgotha. And, it was true that first Easter Sunday morning, just at dawn. She needed the ability to see beyond the moment. It is not what you look at; it is what you see.

It was Thoreau who said it first, or at least he was the first to teach it to me: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." The only dawn we will ever see is the one we are prepared for. And if you get so wound up, or wound down, in all the little ordinary events of our workaday worlds, in the petty complaints that everything is not being done the way you want it; if you try to keep it within the boundaries of what you describe and believe; you will miss it too, as aye, we have and have again. Sometimes, said Emerson, "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind". Things: guns, sticks, stones, fists, fires, accidents, earthquakes, hatred. Things, death and tombstones: all the things that make for the wanton destruction of all that life should be. They are in the saddle, or at least it seems that way.

And it looked that way to Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, and Salome, as they came up to the sepulchre that first Easter morning. How sad and tragic it had been. This lonely little group was left to sail the mighty sea, their boat thrown adrift, tossed by the waves, their rudder broken,

and the Captain dead. How sad and tragic and hopeless it looked, as they sauntered up with their spices to the tomb. So, sometime before the dawn, when it was still too dark to see what was going on outside, they came to the tomb, wondering and worried about how life could be so empty. Luke says they had their heads bowed down, and I think they missed it at first.

There it was. There he was, standing beside them with the living message that all was well again, the miraculous had happened, and they missed it. They were so sure of their worries, so wound up in what was happening in the small corners of their own wee worlds, so afraid and troubled, so angry and bewildered at what was going on, so limited in their view of what the world was, or could be, their eyes were so filled with tears, they did not see it. The sun had risen again, dawn had come; and their heads were bowed so low in grief, they never even noticed. This simple, powerful, little firsthand message brought the news they needed. For it is a scene of victory you need to know is true. Otherwise, this life is a hoax. And all the masochistic pessimists and cynics will win the day; as Jean Paul Sartre was saying, "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself by weakness, and surely dies by chance."

Then, along comes Easter, primarily to show that the living God has conquered. Life does not belong to death, but neither does anything else. The bullies will not win the day, even though they can torment the neighborhood. Family strife will never conquer all that is good and wholesome about a love that is shared. Frustration on the job will never quite destroy the man. Alcohol will not debilitate a man beyond recall and even death will never be the victor. For, along comes Easter, and everything is turned right

side up again. It brought the news they needed, that the universe cannot be alien to our highest hopes and dreams, that somehow it is compatible for all you need and want to live. Somehow it ties down the loose ends of all eternal torment.

I read the other day that the astrophysic scientists from the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory are guessing that eternal darkness may be the fate of our vast unfolding universe. "It might become just a graveyard of frozen darkness," said Professor Edward Harrison from Amherst College. And he opined that it would make the whole thing meaningless; if that should be its fate, he said, "I would just quit and spend my whole life raising roses." Or, Bertrand Russell said, "You can dig your garden until it is time to dig your grave." Einstein knew, of course, in his initial formulations that a static universe was quite impossible. The gravity of all those parts is surely insufficient to hold it all together. It is in some movement, perhaps another said, "folding in upon itself". And old Heinrich Heine was saying, "Only idiots expect an answer." And Elliott was writing: The world will end some day "not with a bang but a whimper". Yet, still, the key to unraveling all that is back at the beginning, if God made the world, and made it with a purpose, then what of all of that? It does not become meaningless when it physically deteriorates, or even if it is swallowed in the darkest holes of outer space.

And, into all the hollow of that time beyond our time and space, Mary Magdalene's little sermon is echoing still: Hey, big old universe, I have seen the Lord! Oh, great dark recesses of the planetary space, hush up

now. I have seen the Lord. And nothing else will ever matter.

Thirdly, then we will render it. I have seen the Lord! That is who I saw. My friends, you need to know that we are not at the mercy of the tyrants of the world, or else the likes of Adolph Hitler win the day, and rule eternity as well. You need to know that what you and I do here today is of everlasting significance in the many, not-so-merry-go-rounds of the future. I am here to remind you that the universe and its story is not a tale told by an idiot. The stupid little bullets from the gun of a deranged sniper in Baltimore cannot be the last word on those whose skin they penetrate. You need to know that life is not at the whim and wish and accidents of time. You can learn that here at the feet of Easter morning. The third day always comes. Sometimes it tarries. Sometimes, it seems as though the third day is but a hoax, a promise made up to get you through. Then you need to hear and trust with Tennyson:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
will be the final goal of all.....
That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed -
or cast as rubbish to the void -
When God hath made the pile complete.

You need to know that Something, Someone, outside of time, is there: unbounded by the limitations of our space; untouched by the experiences of the unpredictable. The Lord of Hosts is His name. That is who it is. I have seen the Lord of all the earth. You need to know that however long you have left to live, 60 years or 60 days, and all in between, that sitting on the huge enormous stone which from time to time will

block your way, will be the angels of God's mercy who will keep watch on you and roll them all away. The Bible stories all have happy endings.

How do I know that? Well, to be scrutinizingly honest, I really do not know it. But I know enough to tell you I believe it; I know enough to live by it and love it. I know enough to tell you that if you are at loose ends with yourself, wondering what on earth to do, he can turn your life around. This Easter morning message can. It can give you a starting point, a place to begin. The best one liner you ever have a right to hear: "I have seen the Lord." He is not dead but is risen as he said.

I see him seated in an empty chair in the corner of a hospital room, waiting and watching over those who come in lonely and afraid. I have never had a chimerical vision, but I have seen his love let loose upon the world of weary, panic-stricken men. I have heard the "All is well." I have never seen a vision of an angel in the sky seated upon some celestial throne, but I have the vision of an angel, time and time again, sitting on the tops of all the sundry rocks which have fallen in the pathways of our lives, and even better, rolling them away. I have felt the presence of God's resurrecting spirits bringing hope to the ruins of our lives.

Don't tell me I do not know it! On all my daily rounds, I see the living Christ. We have increasing witness in our day that it is either Christ or chaos in our world. We are tearing down the cross in our time, ripping the faith apart. Our time belittles all that is beyond the touch and grasp of our material world. I had a professor my beginning year at college

who threw a Bible into the corner on the first day of a class in Analytical Philosophy. He went over and kicked it and picked it up and threw it down again. "Does that offend anyone?", he said arrogantly. "I want you to know as beginning students that we do not tolerate worship of the Bible around here." And I said, "No, what you do does not offend me, but a man who will throw the Bible away is likely to throw everything else away, too." And now, I hesitate to say it, but it has always been more than coincidental to me that the same professor threw himself out a seventh story window eleven years later, and died in a corner of a courtyard down below. Dr. Coffin used to say, a man needs two things: "a home and an horizon". A place to be in the day by day world all around you, a place to hang your head and rest your weary bones; but a place to guide your course upon, in the land of hope.

In John Masefield's Trial of Jesus, there is a marvelous passage where Longinis, the centurion in command of the soldiers of the cross, comes back at the end of the day to Pilate to give his daily report. Pilate's wife, after the official reports, beckons to the centurion and begs him to tell her more about the Crucifixion and how the prisoner died ...When the telling of the story is over, she suddenly says, "Longinis, do you think he is dead?". "No, ma'am," he answers, "I don't." "Then, where is he?", she asks. "Let loose in the world," he said, "where neither Roman nor Jew will ever stop his truth."

And, similarly, in "The Robe", Marcellus says to Justus: "If you think Jesus is alive, where is he?". Justus shook his head, made a hopeless little gesture with both hands and drew a long sigh. "I don't know," he said, "but I do know he is alive."

Then, after a moment's pause, he said: "I'm always looking for him...every time a door opens ...at every turn of the road...at every street corner...at every crest of every hill...I am always looking for him."

I read yesterday that tourist traffic was up again in the Holy Land this Easter. Israeli troops were on guard but no incidents were reported. Over 10,000 Christians marched their way up the Via Dolorosa, the road which Jesus walked on Good Friday morning en route to Golgotha. Some even carried giant symbolic wooden crosses. Vendors, the article said, were hawking replicas of wooden crosses and crowns of thorns and little statues of the suffering Christ. And then, last night, Easter Eve, the hundreds who could manage to crowd inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre sat and waited in their Easter vigil. Waited all night long for the symbolic flame to leap forth out of what is said to be the tomb of Christ. Then they press forward to light their own torches and tapers and go out to announce the dawn, not only of a day, but of an eternity. I hope that you will do the same with this first Easter sermon: "I have seen the Lord!"

Amen.

Thanks to the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Harper, this sermon is reproduced for Southminster members and their friends.