

“Turn Around and See”
John 20:1-18
Sunday, April 24, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

For some folks, it is easy to believe. David Leininger tells this story of a Sunday School teacher who had just finished telling her third graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing off the only way in or out. Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, and the surprise of Easter morning, she asked: "And what do you think were Jesus' first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive."

A hand shot up into the air from the rear of the classroom. It belonged to a most excited little girl. Leaping out of her chair she shouted out excitedly, "I know, I know, I know."

"Good," said the teacher. "Tell us."

Extending her arms high in the air she sang out: "TA - DA!"

For some folks, belief is more difficult. Steven Molin, in his book, Four Truths and a Lie, writes:

“A young college co-ed walked in to her counselor's office and confessed that she didn't believe in God anymore. Her dad was a Lutheran pastor and she had been spoon-fed the gospel all her life. But now, in college, she was smarter than all that; now she trusted science, now she believed in bright professors and thick textbooks and knowledge and reason; faith seemed to insult her intellect. When she got up to leave, the counselor said the only thing he should have said when she first sat down; ‘Jenny,’ he said, ‘God loves you, even when you don't believe that God exists.’”

“Tears filled her eyes, and she said, ‘I know he does.’ Faith, it seems, comes in all sorts of shapes and degrees. Maybe that’s why you’re here today; you’ve come to see and hear the story once again. You aren’t certain that it’s true; like Jenny, you struggle to wrap your brain around it. But you’re here. Thank God you’re here.”

I. Turn around.

In the scripture reading from the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene struggles with belief, too.

Her struggle is symbolized in John’s telling of the resurrection. John’s gospel is rich with spiritual symbolism.

In the reading for Easter Sunday, Mary turns around twice. I am so intrigued by this. John writes, in his gospel, “she turned around,” and later, “she turned.”

In the first “turning,” Mary escapes the pain of the tomb. She turns around to avoid the awful truth of his tortured, suffering, public execution. She turns around in disbelief. His body had been stolen. Maybe this gardener, this grave-tender, knows where it is.

People try to turn around their lives all the time. They try to make a fresh start. They try to ignore the tomb behind them, the grave filled with the devastation of their past. They try to turn around.

And so often they fail.

Have you ever failed at turning around your life?

In her first turning, Mary “sees,” but she doesn’t truly see. She has no eyes to see. She is spiritually blind.

She has no understanding. She has no hope. She is looking for a dead body. She is not looking for Jesus, the living Christ. After all, she has watched for hours and hours – for an

eternity! -- as he is tortured and killed. She witnesses the nails being driven into his flesh. She stays with him through his agony on the cross. She knows he is dead; she is a witness to his final, labored breath.

Martin Luther once spent three days in a black depression over something that had gone wrong. On the third day his wife came downstairs dressed in mourning clothes. "Who's dead?" he asked her. "God," she replied. Luther rebuked her, saying, "What do you mean, God is dead? God cannot die." "Well," she replied, "the way you've been acting I was sure He had!"

Mary Magdalene acts as though Jesus is dead because she has seen him die!

She may not have eyes to see yet, but she has ears to hear. When Jesus speaks her name -- "Mary!" -- she turns once again. Instantly she knows him and cries out in Hebrew, "Rabbouni! Teacher!"

She hears his teachings. She believes his word. She knows his voice, as all his sheep know the voice of their Shepherd.

Turning around to escape from pain, nothing changes for Mary. All she sees is a gardener.

Turning around once again, at the sound of her own name on the lips of the Savior, everything changes in an instant. She hears, she turns, she confesses, "Rabbouni! Teacher!" She is a witness, now empowered to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" But she did not see him first. She heard him call her name. You can hear Him, too.

II. Believe

In order to hear Jesus call your name, you only have to listen. Pause for a moment. Slow down. Tell him you are waiting and listening.

Let's listen right now. Let's pause for a moment and listen in silence.

[Silence].

You know, he's always calling your name. Over and over again, he calls to you, until you hear him. If you haven't heard him yet, keep listening. Maybe the noise of your life is drowning out his voice. Maybe the tomb of your life – the pain, the depression, the grief, the guilt, the despair -- distracts you. Keep listening. You will hear him.

And while you're listening, turn around again, as Mary did. "Turn around" – this is another way of saying "repent." Turn your life around. Repent of the past. Ask Jesus to help you. Your changed life will say to the world, "I have seen the risen Lord."

King Duncan tells a story, "about a woman named Rosemary who works in the Alzheimer's Unit of a nursing home. Rosemary and a colleague named Arlene brought the residents of the home together one Good Friday afternoon to view Franco Zeffirelli's acclaimed production Jesus of Nazareth. They wondered whether these elderly Alzheimer's patients would even know what was going on, but they thought it might be worth the effort.

"When they finally succeeded in getting everyone into position, they started the video. Rosemary was pleasantly surprised at the quiet attention being paid to the screen. At last came the scene where Mary Magdalene comes upon the empty tomb and sees Jesus' body not there. An unknown man, in reality the risen Christ, asks Mary why she is looking for the living among the dead. Mary runs as fast as she can back to the disciples and tells Peter and the rest with breathless excitement, 'He's alive! I saw Him, I tell you! He's alive.' The doubt in their eyes causes Mary to pull back. 'You don't believe me . . . You don't believe me!'

"From somewhere in the crowd of Alzheimer's patients came the clear, resolute voice of Esther, one of the patients. 'WE BELIEVE YOU,' she said, 'WE BELIEVE YOU!'

“Well, Esther, I believe it too. The evidence is overwhelming, and life makes no sense without it. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.”

III. Christ is risen

Writes Victor Shepherd in his book, How Do We Know He's Alive?:

“From time to time people ask me if the resurrection of Jesus can be proved. It can't. What's more, Jesus himself has never wanted it proved. He has always wanted followers, not detectives.”

Bishop Ruediger Minor is a retired United Methodist Bishop. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he is the son of a Methodist family. In 1986 he was elected Bishop by the Central Conference in the German Democratic Republic. In 1992 he was assigned to Russia and its neighbor countries with the task of reorganizing Methodist work in this area after Communism. Bishop Minor tells this story:

Two years before the collapse of Communism in East Germany, at a special meeting of the Communist Party, a Marxist philosopher lectured for 55 minutes on atheism and why there is no God.

A few people nervously applauded at the conclusion of the Marxist lecture.

A Russian Orthodox priest then came to the podium. He was told he had 3 minutes to speak.

He said he did not need 3 minutes. He only needed 3 words.

He shouted these 3 words at the top of his lungs:

“Christ is risen!!”

The Great Assembly responded:

“Christ is risen indeed!!”

Again he shouted:

“Christ is risen!!”

Again the people responded:

Christ is risen indeed!!

A third time, to this crowd of party bureaucrats:

“Christ is risen!!”

And a third time they responded:

“Christ is risen indeed!!”

With that, the priest turned from the podium and returned to his seat.

Closing.

One more time, I proclaim to you:

CHRIST IS RISEN!!

(and the people respond)

CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!!

(repeat, as seems appropriate)

Amen.