

“Seeing Is Believing”

This week, when reading the gospel lesson for today, I kept humming one of my favorite hymns. The first and last lines of this song are: *Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart ... Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my vision, O Ruler of All.* This great hymn surfaced in my mind because when it comes to the resurrection, John’s Gospel emphasizes the important role of vision. This is the message that Mary gives the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” When it comes to Easter, there is no knowing, there is no real believing, without dramatic seeing. Author O. Wesley Allen, Jr., in his book Preaching Resurrection, lists the various visionary experiences characterized in today’s Gospel lesson.

Hear in capsule and paraphrased form the lesson: Mary saw that the stone had been rolled away but she did not know where they had taken the Lord. The disciple whom Jesus loved looked in the tomb and saw the linen clothes lying in separate places. The beloved disciple followed, and saw the linen cloths and believed. (Just what he believed I’m not sure, because John says that, “For as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Perhaps, like Mary, he, too, believed that the body had been stolen!) Then Mary looked in the tomb and saw two angels sitting at the head and the foot where Jesus’ body had been, still she did not know where they had taken the Lord. But when she saw Jesus she knew it was Jesus, and her message was crystal clear: “I have seen the Lord!”

When we think about it, it was not much help to Mary to focus on the linen cloths and the empty tomb. It was only when she was able to see Jesus that she was able to believe. Just being there at the empty tomb is not enough. One must be encountered by the Risen Christ. In truth, Mary went seeking her Lord and is surprised by what she doesn’t find. However, only when she is found by the One she seeks ... only when hearing her name spoken by Jesus’ familiar voice ... “Mary!” ... is her grief transformed and her world changed anew. In truth, faith in Easter is a pure gift to us from God ... a God who comes to us and gives us what we need to believe.

I read some place where a historian of the modern world said that “Once the modern world convinced itself that nothing is real except what we can see, taste, and touch, the modern world has gone down hill ever since. ... that the modern world was dedicated to the principal that there is no reality other than what we can see.” This I think is the attitude of some salesclerks whose philosophy is “what you see is what you get.”

When I want sermon illustration or an “existential experience” I shop at Home Depot. One time when installing a new shower, I needed three pieces of shower sheet rock called green board that runs 3’ by 5’. When I asked the clerk, he said they didn’t carry green board in that size. I challenged him and said I thought they did. He became testy and said, “Look, this is my department. I know what we have and we have no 3 x 5 green board.” I pushed a little further, “Show me what you got.” Angrily he takes me over to the green board and points and shouts, “Look, what you see here is all there is either take it or leave it.” The size on the sign said 36” by 60”! I said I thought I could make it work. He whipped out his tape and to his absolute amazement he discovered that 36” by 60” is also 3’ by 5’! Seeing is believing!!

I find this example a brief summary on modern education. You look at the world. There are some things about the world that don’t seem right to us. A number of aspects about the world and ourselves displease us. But growing up and becoming an adult means to be the sort of person who is able to say, “Well, this is all there is. What you see is what you get. Either take it or leave it.” Most of us learn to take it rather than leave it. We take the world, asking only that we have the stomach to take the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. What we see is what we get. There is a certain dignity, a kind of courage to not whine while living on the basis of what appears before us to be what it is. This is all there is. Live with it!

And yet, this attitude does not do justice to the complexities of vision. How do we see? You don’t have to live very long before realizing that what you see is not necessarily what there is. The brain filters out many visual impressions we see. What we see seems to be connected to some sort of template in the brain. When sensory images are fed in through the optic nerve the brain sorts through its collection of previously experienced images ... makes matches ... fits what we see into a pattern, and we are led to say, “There it is! That’s a tree.”

But what does the brain do with things that don’t fit into previously experienced patterns? What if our vision is out of focus? What if our seeing is sometimes limited by what we expect to see, or have the courage to see? What if it is not so much a matter of “you get what you see,” but also a matter of “you see what you have already gotten?” Thus Mary

Magdalene appeared at the tomb of Jesus early Easter morning. When she saw that the huge stone at the door of the tomb was rolled away, and that the tomb was empty, she immediately saw what had happened. Obviously, someone had stolen the body of Jesus and she did not know where they had put him. Even when an angel appears and asks her why she is weeping, Mary still says that someone has stolen the body of Jesus.

It is not until Jesus himself appears to Mary and calls her by name that she begins to see. Even then, she at first thinks that the risen Christ is a gardener. Mary just can't get out of her mind that she is at a cemetery, a place of death and loss. She can't refocus her eyes ... even when an angel ... even when the risen Christ is standing in front of her.

Then there is the disciple Thomas. When he hears the report that Jesus' body is missing and that Jesus has appeared before some of the other disciples, Thomas says that unless he sees the wounds that killed Jesus, he won't believe. After all, the one believable thing about Jesus is that he is crucified, dead, and buried, with large holes in his hands and a gaping wound in his side. That's reality! However, when the risen Christ appears, tells Thomas to touch his wounds, Thomas professes, "My Lord and my God." It wasn't that Thomas refused to believe. He believed. He believed in what he could see. And what he could see was death, failure, and destruction. Mary was the same. Until Jesus called her by name, her vision was out of focus. Until the risen Christ asked Thomas to touch his wounds, Thomas could not see.

What does it take to get us to see what is there? I believe it is not enough to say, "Well, what you see is what you get." I don't believe it because there is a matter of inadequate perception ... a matter of failed vision. We've all had that frustrating experience of seeing something at a distant point across the landscape and tried to point it out to a friend or spouse or children. "Look over there! Right there! No, not there ... there ... right there." They squint, shrug their shoulders; they can't see what we see. We're frustrated. We give directions. "Just to the right, where that tree splits ... the third one over ... its right there ... what are you ... blind?" Then there is screaming and the gnashing of teeth!! Or there are those distant questions that come to us through the air, "Honey, where did you put the ...?" "It's in the kitchen." Where in the kitchen?" "On the counter." "Where on the counter." You get up, go to the kitchen, and point to the counter and say, "There!" "Where?" (And the dance of marriage goes on).

What enables us to see? What is it that can grab our heads, turn our eyes in the right direction, and bring everything into focus? For Mary and for Thomas, it was the risen Christ. He did not leave them to their own devices. He did not expect them to build upon their past experiences. He did not rely on their misperceptions, but rather he came to them. He spoke to one ... and then he encouraged the other to touch his very body. He turned their gaze away from what was expected and accustomed toward what was being revealed. This is why Christianity is called a *revealed* religion. You can't *see it* until it is revealed, given to you, until one has experienced the gift of the presences of the Risen Christ, and then one's eyes get in focus.

As Paul puts it, most of the time we "see through a mirror dimly." Occasionally, by the grace of God and grace alone ... do things come into focus and we see, "face to face." That's Easter. It wasn't just that Jesus was raised from the dead. It was that he was raised for us. He returned to his friends, revealed himself to them, and enabled their eyes to be opened ... to see ... and to believe!

Think! What life experiences have you had that such encounters opened your eyes to reality and truth? Giving birth to your first child? Parris Island? Freshman college English or Calculus or Statistics or Accounting 101 or Logic or Systematic Theology. Being fired from a job? Death to someone close to you? We experience a number of "coming to Jesus" experiences that clear and sharpen our vision. We are then redirected ... as if in an instant everything comes into focus ... and we see ... we actually see for the first time that which was either hidden; or that which we just couldn't see ... or that which we didn't want to see. But we get the vision that was meant to be ... a vision of who we could be ... and our world changed in the blink of an eye ... forever. Reality piercing illusions! I think for Mary, for Thomas, as well as for us ... I think Easter was and is like that.

Seeing is believing. Most of us need some tangible, visible evidence in order to believe. Fortunately, the Risen Christ gives us what we need to believe. The Risen Christ overcomes our distorted, inadequate vision and shows himself to us in countless ways. So keep in mind ... faith in Easter is a pure gift to you from God ... a God who comes to you and gives you *what* you need to believe. Amen.