

Seeing and Believing

Monologue: Mary (John 20:1-18)¹

When I got there, the stone was. . . rolled away. No guards, no body, no nothing. For just a moment, I. . . I could almost imagine it hadn't happened. Almost. But not quite.

I couldn't think of what to do next. At least, before, I knew what was expected: when someone dies, you take spices and prepare the body for burial. And I'd done it before: for my parents, for my uncle, when my nephew drowned in that fishing accident. But without a body, what then?

So I went back to the upper room. When I told them about the rolled-away stone, they didn't believe me. I can't say I blame them—who *could* believe something like that? They kept insisting I was out of my mind with grief, but I know the difference between grief and insanity. Peter, of course, Mr. Impulsive, took off like a shot to see for himself. And John, you know how tender-hearted he is. . . if there was any chance that. . . well, if there was any chance, he was going to check it out. Everyone else stayed put. They were probably scared to death, what with the riot police in high alert and the curfew and all.

When we got there, it was just like I'd left it. The two of them actually went into the tomb, though that didn't really tell us anything new. We stood around a little, and then they. . . went home, or back to the others—I don't know. I was too preoccupied to be paying much attention. I just couldn't get over the fact that the body was gone. How do you explain something like that? It looked like someone had come and taken his body—someone strong, by the looks of that stone—and who would do a thing like that? And why? Hadn't enough bad things already happened?

Then. . . well, I have to admit this part is a little funny. . . after the fact. At the time, believe me, I wasn't laughing. This guy showed up, dressed in work clothes, and I thought he was probably the gardener. I figured he'd know what was up. But. . . yeah, you guessed it, it was really Jesus. In my defense, I have to say he was *the last* person I expected to see, so it's really not too much of a surprise that I didn't recognize him. And here's how I knew him: he called me by name.

You think it's no big deal to be recognized, but how many times in your life have you been really *seen*? Yeah, that's what I thought. Me neither. But Jesus. . . when Jesus sees you, it's the most truthful and loving and hopeful seeing that you'll ever know. So it's not something you forget. When he called my name, I knew, just *knew* that it was him, and let me tell you, I about fainted, or jumped for joy, or *something*!

I could have stayed with him forever. . . in fact, I was thinking about never letting him out of my sight again. But he told me to go tell the others, and that he'd meet up with us again, and who was I to say, no thanks, I'm not gonna do what my risen Lord just told me to do? So I tore on back to the others to tell them all about it. They had their doubts, and who can blame then? If I hadn't seen him myself I don't think I would have. But I did, and I do, and. . . wow. It's true. He's alive again. Never thought I'd actually say that.

¹ Monologues come from Easter-Pentecost Worship Resources 2011, *Leader: Spring 2011*, Vol. 8/No. 3, Faith & Life Resources (MennoMedia).

Monologue: Thomas (John 20:19-31)

Jesus is alive, I tell you. He's alive! Believe it—don't doubt it like I did.

You see, I am not a man easily swayed. I base my beliefs on careful reasoning and test ideas through experience. But I have found out the hard way that it's not always that simple.

Like. . . I walked with Jesus throughout his life, me and the rest of his disciples. Jesus spoke to us, taught us. I learned so much! He made the most sense of any teacher I'd ever heard. He told the truth I'd been looking for. And it wasn't just the teaching. I saw disfigured hands become whole, scarred and blistered skin made as smooth as a baby's, shriveled legs grow strong, and blind eyes finally able to see! He even told us what was going to happen, and raised the dead to life. I was there. I saw lives changed, *my* life was changed. But. . . well, after he died, that was it. I was heart-broken, you can believe me. But I was also a realist. It was good while it lasted, but I knew I had to face facts.

Then Mary and the other disciples claimed they had seen Jesus, and they thought I should believe them! But I knew better. I'd seen him lashed, skin torn and disfigured; I'd seen him nailed to the cross, both hands and feet; I'd seen him hung there, seen the sword pierce his side. He wasn't alive. He was *not* alive! We all wanted it, but that didn't make it so. At least that's what I kept telling myself. Because deep down, I wanted to believe just like the rest of them.

I guess you could call me one of the lucky ones. I wanted to see and touch—I thought I *had* to see and touch—and I got to. And it was great. But as I've thought about it. . . well, I learned something there I didn't expect. I learned that sometimes you really can take somebody else's word for it. Because for God. . . well, for God, nothing is impossible. So you—don't make the same mistake I did. Jesus really is alive. And you have the chance to receive a blessing I couldn't—to believe even though you've not seen. Because. . . well, seeing isn't everything. It's a help, sure. But if you only believed what you saw, you'd be missing out on some of the truest things I know: God loves us. Jesus is really alive. It's not all over. Believe me. I wouldn't say it if it weren't true.

Meditation

We just heard two eyewitness accounts of encounters with Jesus. We often hear these on subsequent Sundays – Mary Magdalene's on Easter and Thomas' on the next Sunday. Mary is often lauded as a woman of faith while Thomas is criticized as a man who doubts. Are these characterizations true?

Mary went to put spices on Jesus' body and discovered the stone had been removed from the tomb. She reported to Peter and John what had happened. They ran to the tomb, discovered that Jesus' body was gone, believed that he had been resurrected (well, at least one of them believed – and it's not quite clear exactly what he believed), and ran back to tell everyone else. Mary remained at the tomb, bewildered and devastated. She didn't come to any kind of faith by seeing the empty tomb and the abandoned grave cloths. She didn't come to faith by the revelation of the angels who were in the tomb. She didn't even come to faith when she saw the risen Christ standing in front of her or when he asked her why she was crying. She didn't recognize this man she loved so dearly and mourned so greatly. It wasn't until he said her name that she really saw him and knew who he was. Her testimony when she returned to the disciples was: *I have seen the Lord*.

Compare Mary's story with that of Thomas. On Sunday evening of the same day Mary saw him, Jesus appeared to his disciples, but Thomas wasn't there. Jesus blessed them with his peace, showed them his wounds, commissioned them to continue God's work, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and granted them the power to forgive sins. When Thomas heard the report from the other disciples he didn't want to base his faith on their experience. He wanted to see and touch Jesus for himself. A week later he got his wish. Jesus again appeared to the disciples. Jesus showed his

wounds to Thomas and told Thomas to touch him. Thomas' testimony after this experience was as strong as any other witness, including that of Mary. He referred to Jesus as *my Lord and my God*.

There are things I wonder about in this story, things I wish John had told us. I wonder what the week was like for Thomas – the week between hearing what he had missed and actually seeing Jesus for himself. I imagine Thomas was filled with conflicting emotions: wanting to believe what he was told, but not quite able to. We're told that when you hear something that's too good to be true, it's probably not true. But these were his friends, not some con artist who was trying to get his money. His relationship and history with them would have let him know they were worthy of his trust. I imagine he was somewhat envious: wishing he would have been there with them, seeing and experiencing everything with them. In current terminology, we would say his FOMO – fear of missing out – had been realized.

I wonder what expression was on Jesus' face and what his tone of voice was when he spoke to Thomas. Was he irritated and impatient? *How much proof do you need to believe? If you must, come over here and touch my hands and side!* Or was Jesus patient and kind? *What will help you believe? Please come here. Touch my hands and side.* It seems easy to believe that Jesus was kind and patient with Mary, asking why she was crying and who she was looking for. Could the same be true in his interactions with Thomas?

I wonder if Thomas actually touched the hands and feet of Jesus. What happened is not clear. Jesus simply refers to his having believed because he had seen. This sounds similar to the experience of Mary. She believed after she saw and heard Jesus.

At the end of the story, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon all who have not seen and yet who believe. He blesses all who come to faith through the word of God, through the apostles and the church. How encouraging for us! Jesus assures everyone who hasn't seen him in the flesh that faith is available to all persons in all places regardless of distance in time or place from when he lived on earth.

This discussion of faith can be confusing. Is seeing believing? Or is believing seeing? The stories of Mary Magdalene and Thomas help us to realize that believing and seeing are all mixed up together.

Usually, what we see depends mainly on what we look for. We see what we expect or want to see. All too often, we latch on to only those bits of information that support our predetermined opinions about a particular idea or person. Mary was looking for a body, she didn't expect to see Jesus as a living, breathing person. Perhaps Thomas expected to encounter Jesus as a ghost if he encountered Jesus at all. He couldn't believe his fellow disciples had seen a tangible, touchable Savior rather than some wispy specter. He couldn't change his perception until he received more information.

Seeing what we look for is true in our personal relationships – spouses, family members, co-workers, friends, brothers and sisters in church. This is also true in our relationship with Jesus, in our faith. In all our relationships we experience times of doubt and faith, closeness and distance, presence and absence, belief and unbelief. A variety of factors can cloud our vision in our personal relationships and in our relationship with God. We can control some of these; others we can't. We help each other to believe and see by sharing our experiences, setting aside preconceived notions, listening well to each other, reading the stories of God's action in the world, and listening to God together.

I assume that each one of us has at least one story about when our vision has been clouded and at least one story about when we have seen the Lord. These personal stories as well as the stories of Mary, Thomas, and many others encourage us in our faith. They help us turn to Jesus and meet a real Savior who brings resurrection for all. Though we aren't able to see Jesus in the flesh, we can believe he is the anointed one, the liberating king. We can participate in the fullness of life he came to share.

Thanks be to God.