

“Prove It To Me”
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John 20:19-31

Last week, as we prepared for our Easter Sunday worship services, I had the opportunity to speak with each of the three women who would be reading the Gospel lesson. I can't remember which one it was to whom I said it, but I told one of them that they were about to read the best scripture in all of the Bible. The story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ on Easter morn.

It's my favorite scripture. When anyone ever asks me that, "what is your favorite scripture?" that's exactly what I say - John 20:1-18. And my favorite line? When Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples and says, "I have seen the Lord!"

It's an unbelievably wonderful passage of scripture recounting an unbelievably wonderful occurrence!

Everytime I heard it last week - four times - it sent chills down my spine. To have seen Jesus after experiencing his horrible death and burial, was life-changing, and to hear Mary tell about it is fabulous. I always feel like Mary Magdalene was the first female preacher!

To hear that lesson read last week was the icing on the cake for what I thought was incredible and moving worship! There was electricity in the air in here! From the moment the organ prelude began, then to the handbells ringing and them moving right into the fabulous hymn with brass and organ and hundreds of people singing - it doesn't get much better than that!

It was an incredible day with an incredible scripture telling about an incredible occurrence! So naturally, wouldn't it seem logical that today we would continue the ride of joy? Shouldn't the celebration still be going on? Shouldn't we be seeing Jesus' followers in the streets telling everybody they could the good news?

Instead - we get this. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews . . . " What? What's going on? There's not only no party, but the disciples are behind closed and locked doors, frightened.

What happened? Didn't they hear Mary Magdalene's good news? Didn't they

believe her? What happened?

Maybe they wouldn't let themselves believe that Jesus was alive. Maybe they couldn't be that vulnerable, to trust that the impossible could have come true. They couldn't risk it. They couldn't believe her, and then maybe find out it wasn't true. They couldn't let their hearts be broken twice. So they hung together in fear, locked away where nothing and nobody could get to them. That's where the disciples were after Easter.

Except for Thomas, of course. We heard that in the reading, but what we didn't hear was why he wasn't there. There could be any number of reasons why he wasn't there. Maybe he needed to be alone in his grief. Maybe he went to get food or supplies for them. You know, Thomas was always the practical one. When Jesus talked about turning toward Jerusalem, it was Thomas who said, "Let's go, we're with you." And later when Jesus talked about going away, it was Thomas who questioned him further, "Lord, we don't know where you're going, how can we know the way?" Thomas was the practical one, so maybe on this occasion Thomas had to do something too.

At any rate, he wasn't there with the others, when the most incredible thing happened. Jesus appeared to them - alive, just like Mary Magdalene had said. And when He appeared, He gave them an incredible gift. The first words out of His mouth were these - "Peace be with you." Peace be with you. Not "what are you doing locked away behind these closed doors?" or "Thanks a lot for abandoning me when I needed you the most." No - He didn't berate them, or question them, or test them, instead, Jesus loved them and granted them peace. He met them where they were and gave them what they needed most of all - peace.

It's actually the same gift He had given to Mary Magdalene earlier. For she had been frantic at seeing the empty tomb. She had been desolate and grief-stricken, her confidence, her new sense of self, had been ripped away. She was a shell of her former self, and saw reason to go on - and then, Jesus appeared before her, and the first thing He did was give her a gift - and it too, was a gift of peace - He said her name.

Poor old Thomas missed it all! When the disciples told him they had seen the Lord (much like Mary Magdalene had told them), he wasn't buying it (much like they apparently didn't buy Mary's story either). Thomas was not going to buy such a far-fetched story unless he could see it for himself, with his own two eyes. Thomas too was shell-shocked like the others had been. He wasn't about to let his guard down, and then find out it wasn't true and be hurt all over again. It wasn't going to happen.

And then a few days later, Jesus came back to that same place, and this time Thomas was there, and it was to Thomas that Jesus spoke - and to Thomas that He offered the gift this same - the very same gift - "Peace be with you." Then He went a step further, trying to answer Thomas' "prove it to me" challenge. He invited Thomas to see for himself - to actually touch his hands and side. And then Thomas knew - it was for real - this was really real - Jesus was indeed alive - and in awe and praise Thomas gave his heart over fully - "My Lord and my God!"

Mary Magdalene - the disciples - and Thomas - after the death and resurrection of Jesus they were all in different places - literally and figuratively - they were all in different places on their journey of faith too. But as one person so beautifully put it, "No matter where we are in our relationship with Jesus, the good news is that he meets us in that place." (On-line, "Adventures in Revland," Mark Roberts)

That is so true - He met all of them, Mary Magdalene, the disciples and Thomas, right where they were, right at their point of greatest need. And when He did, He gave them the proof they needed to believe. He showed them what they needed to see.

I read this week about a young man who experienced much the same thing. He was sick, very sick actually, close to death. Someone asked him how he was feeling now that he knew he was at the end, and was he afraid. The man replied, "Afraid? No, I'm not afraid because of my faith in Jesus." Well, the person who was speaking with him who was also a devout Christian said back, "We all have hope that our future is in God's hands." To which the young man replied, "Well, I'm not hopeful because of what I believe about the future. I'm hopeful because of what I've experienced in the past. I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed, and gotten lost. And time and again, He came back for me. He found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for Him. I don't think He'll let something like my dying get in the way of His love for me." (Ibid.)

That young man knew exactly what Mary Magdalene and the disciples knew - that God met them in their place of greatest need, He, as the young man said, "came back for them." He showed them what they needed to see, He proved it for them.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God is still the same today, and still comes to us in our place of greatest need. Still He comes to us, in times of certainty, and especially, thankfully, in times when we're struggling and in doubt, times when we might just as well be saying "Prove it to me. Prove you are who you say you are, God."

Still, He comes to us and shows us who He is, and how much He loves us. How? In so many different ways.

Through the Word, through the church, in the world, in people.

Many a person in this room could probably testify to Christ coming alive for them through scripture. It could have happened in a Disciple or Beginnings' class, it could have happened in a moment of personal devotion, it might have happened hearing the Word read in worship, but somewhere along the way, Christ showed Himself to you through the Word, and you knew, you really, truly knew deep down in your heart He was real, and you gave your life into His keeping!

Still others could tell us how Christ was shown most clearly to them, became real to them, in the world, in nature. It might have been standing on the shore watching the ocean waves roll in over an incredible sunrise. Or standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon or gazing at a flowering tree in their backyard. Suddenly they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was real, and He loved them, and there was not a shadow of a doubt in their mind.

And yet others could tell you that it was the church. God proved Himself to them through the church. Christ became alive in their hearts because of the church. I don't know about you - but I don't know how anyone could have sat through last Sunday's worship services and not known that Christ is alive and loves them! The music, the people, the scriptures, the singing, the fellowship, the joy - in so many ways Christ was making Himself known right here in this place. He met all of us right where we were last Sunday morning!

And finally, sometimes, Christ makes Himself known to us, He shows Himself to us, through other people. He becomes real in our lives through people. Let me tell you about how one man experienced that. His name is Richard Fairchild, and now, he's quite a successful pastor in Canada. But at one time, a long time ago, in his college years he was not only not a pastor, he was a bit of a skeptic.

Listen to his story in his words:

"There was at the university a group of Christians called Campus Crusade for Christ, and they used to set up a table in the Student Union Building and do what they called witnessing for Christ."

"I loved to go to that table and make life hard for them. I sort of believed in God - the way so many people do nowadays. But I also sort of believed in astrology, and I played around with telling fortunes using the Tarot Cards as well."

“One thing is certain, I did not believe in Christ as my Lord. I did not know what He stood for, nor what had happened to Him, and I certainly had never gone to Church.”

“Those crazy Christians sat at their table and tried to tell me about the resurrection and about salvation through Jesus, and I told them they were foolish to believe in it, and I asked them why innocent people suffered and why God allowed war and all those other things that are so difficult to answer.”

“I gave them a hard time.”

“A strange thing happened though - even though I tormented them with my questions and made fun of their answers, they invited me to their homes and apartments, they brought me the life blood of all students - coffee, and they fed me meals, and they even, as I found out later, they even prayed for me.”

“They treated me as a friend even while I treated them as people out of touch with reality.”

“Since those days, I have thought about that a lot. I was a stranger. They didn’t need me, they didn’t know me. And yet they wanted something good for me. And they were patient with me, they were kind to me, they helped me, they forgave me, they answered my questions, and they made me feel welcome when no one else did.”

“In short, they showed me something that I had never seen before - they showed me Christian love. Within six months, because of their witness and how God used it in my life, I became a Christian.”

He finished this way: “I never had a problem believing in the resurrection because I saw the marks of Christ in His body - in the people who claimed His name and who walked in His light and who lived as well as they could by His law.”
(On-line, Richard Fairchild)

Christ met Richard Fairchild at his point of greatest need, and proved His love for him, through people - those young people who “passed it on” through Campus Crusade for Christ.

Friends, the Good News of the Gospel is just that - that no matter where you are on your journey of faith, Christ comes to meet you and show Himself to you, at your point of deepest need, in a way that will prove His love for you. So no matter where you are in you journey today - if you’re sure He is alive and living and is the Lord of your life, as did Mary Magdalene; or if you’re locked away behind a door of

fear or shame or doubt, or for any reason, like the disciples; or if you just need something more, some proof, like Thomas - no matter where you are on that journey today, know this, Christ will come and meet you where you are. You can count on it. He loves you that much! It may be through the Word, it may be in the world, it might be here in church, and it might be through somebody else - but He will come, because He loves you more than you can possibly know. Thanks be to God! Amen.