

March 31st: See

If you are joining us for the first time this Easter morning, I am so glad to welcome you to our celebration. As we reflect on our scripture passage together, I hope this story sparks something new in you, or speaks to you in a way that you haven't heard before.

This past Fall we started a sermon series based on the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings from the Bible that take us from the origins of God's people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is "Love in Action." In each of these passages, there's a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, and our time together this morning is focused on learning more about this action so that we can practice it together this week.

Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we'll also be tracing how God's love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God's love is still being shown to us today. As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn't simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God's enduring love for all of creation.

Let's pray together before we discover what this Easter text has for us this morning.

Risen God, We come to your tomb, only to find it empty. We come to grieve, only to find that your body is not there. We come to mourn our loss, only to find that there is hope for new life. We are uncertain, but we long to trust you. Help us to see the truth of this moment, help us to experience the joy of this miracle, help us to share this good news with others who are in need of your divine liberation. Comfort us, encourage us, transform us, we pray. Amen.

Many of us, at one point or another in our lives, have been told that "seeing is believing." You've heard that, right? Seeing is believing.

It's been reinforced for us over and over again. Seeing is believing. Believing goes hand in hand with seeing. We trust what we can see, and we distrust what we can't. In our human brains, and in our lives, we hold these two actions together.

When I was a teenager struggling to get out of bed on time for school, I would promise my mom and dad that the next day would be the day that I didn't snooze my alarm—and they'd respond, "I'll believe it when I see it." When my uncle used to return from the grocery store with scratch off tickets, he would tell my aunt that he was sure that one day he would win the lottery—and she'd respond, "I'll believe it when I see it." And it's not just my weird family—this happens in our public life too. When we listen to politicians make campaign promises that they couldn't possibly achieve once in office, many of us sigh and say, "I'll believe it when I see it." When our local government unveils a massive infrastructure project that is supposed to only take two years and \$100 million to complete, we laugh and say, "I'll believe it when I see it."

Again, we trust that seeing is believing. With that in mind, let's take a closer look at these verses.

Chapter 16 begins with these statements: "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

In ancient Jewish culture, the outward signs and rituals of grieving often fell to women. All of the tasks associated with end of life care or the preparation of a body for burial were the responsibility of female family members or friends. It was women who washed and then wrapped bodies in sheets of linen, it was women who visited the tomb to anoint the body and prepare it for the afterlife, it was women who hosted grieving friends and offered a place to join together in mourning.

We might try to sanitize it, or romanticize these actions, but they were often dirty and difficult work. Especially in the case of unnatural deaths—deaths like

the one Jesus was subjected to, deaths that involved beatings, or piercing, or broken limbs. It is the women who bear witness to the horrific extent to Jesus's suffering, it is the women who see firsthand the brutality that was unleashed upon a human form. The women are the ones who see the reality of this situation. They are the ones who really see the fullness of death.

Because this is not just any death, and not just any burial, the women have questions about what is going to happen next. All of the questions revolve around what they expect to find when they arrive at the tomb—the logistics of the task that is in front of them. They wonder about gaining entry or having help to roll the stone away, because without assistance, they might not be able to access Jesus' body. But when they actually make it to the tomb, they witness a scene that is very unexpected. What they see at the tomb isn't lining up with what they anticipated.

In verse four our gospel author writes, "But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed."

So right away, we get this sense that things are not as they appear. Things are not as they seem. What they are seeing is different from what they believed they would find when they arrived. We hear that their first response to the sight of a man in a white robe is alarm. They are afraid. They are confused. An unknown man is sitting where the body of Jesus is supposed to be, and the rest of the tomb is empty.

The man in white says to them, "Don't be alarmed... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

You might be thinking that alarm seems like the appropriate response in this situation—and I agree with you! How could they not be unsettled by this strange turn of events? How could they look at where the body had been laid and not panic? What are they supposed to do with this news that Jesus is risen

from the dead—when they had seen his crucified body and tended to his mortal wounds? And so, our passage concludes with this: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

That’s how this particular story ends. With fear. The last word in this entire gospel is “afraid.” Mark’s account of Jesus’ birth, ministry, and death ends with this sense of emotion and uncertainty.

So you might be asking: what are we, the modern disciples, the current and future church, supposed to do with this story? What are we supposed to do with this narrative that leaves us all feeling unsettled and confused? It certainly isn’t the usual, triumphant story that we normally tell on Easter, is it?

Well, I do think there is good news for us in these pages, if we are willing to see it. But in order for us to see the good news that God has for us, I want to challenge this idea that seeing is the only way that we can believe. And I especially want to challenge this line of thinking that demands we see before we can believe.

Let me explain.

As a reader, I have a few books that I return to over and over again—I love to come back to them in different seasons and different years—because each time I flip through those familiar pages, there’s something fresh to be experienced or a new piece of the story that resonates with me. The stories themselves are the same, the same ink, the same paper, the same bindings, but I am different, and so the message is different. I might come to the story expecting to respond in a familiar way, but what I take away from the story might be new because circumstances in my life have changed.

I read things differently. I experience things differently. I see things differently.

And that is because we come to books not as they are, but as we are. We come to stories of all kinds not as they are, but as we are. We come to stories with our own experiences, our own biases, our own lenses and interpretations, and

these internal beliefs affect how we see, and what we see. What we read and what we hear can change based upon who we are at that particular moment.

This morning, I would like to argue that the same is true for our lives, and how we interact with reality around us. Author and educator Stephen R. Covey wrote, “We see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or as we are conditioned to see it. When we open our mouths to describe what we see, we in effect describe ourselves, our perspectives, our paradigms.”

Let me repeat that first phrase so it can sink in a little bit more: we see the world, not as it is, but as we are. We see, as we are.

Here’s what I think this might mean for us in the context of today’s story.

I think this means that what we are able to see is shaped by what we already believe to be true. What we are able to see is shaped by what we believe is possible.

When we see the world, not as it is, but as we are, it might turn out that believing is seeing, and not the other way around. When we see as we are, believing can come before seeing, and it might be believing that makes seeing possible.

Whenever I think about the life of faith or about being a believer of this divine story, I always come back to a verse from the New Testament book Hebrews, which defines faith this way, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Another translation of that verse says it this way: “Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.”

And when I think about this verse, I think about how faith might allow us to see things differently.

Even if we might not be able to physically see something, faith gives us the evidence that we are longing for. Or if we might be seeing something

unexpected or impossible, faith is able to reimagine what is in front of us, faith is able to help us understand things with divine eyes instead of human eyes. Faith reframes our vision. Faith gives us a new lens through which to interpret the world. Faith gives us a fresh perspective with which to perceive the reality that we have been hoping for.

Our brains might try to tell us that death is final, but faith shows us that the stone was rolled away.

Our minds might try to convince us that rising from the dead is impossible, but faith reveals that the tomb is empty—there is no dead body to be found.

Our eyes might try to tell that resurrection must be seen in order to be believed, but faith has always known that new life is promised to us.

Our fear might try to tell us that there is no good news to soothe our anxious hearts, but faith sees an opportunity to trust in God's redemptive love.

So whether you've heard this story every Easter for decades, or you're just hearing it for the first time today, I invite you to hear it in a new way. I invite you to hear it through this lens of faith. I invite you, even if you are here with grief, or uncertainty, or general sorrow about the state of the world, to see this story as an invitation to faith, rather than an opportunity for skepticism or suspicion. I invite you, alongside these ancient women witnesses, to come to this tomb with courageous faith instead of apathy or detachment. I invite you to join in this mystery of faith, and this miracle of resurrection, not because it makes perfect sense, but because it is what we are deeply longing to see.

The tomb is empty, my friends. Believe, and see. Amen.