

"I Have Seen The Lord!"

Acts 10:34-43
April 24, 2011

John 20:1-18
St. James UCC

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Let me tell you a story:

Philip was born with Downs Syndrome. He was a pleasant child...happy it seemed... but increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. Philip went to Sunday school faithfully every week. He was in the third grade class with nine other eight-year olds.

You know eight-year olds. And Philip, with his differences was not readily accepted. But his teacher was sensitive to Philip and helped this group of eight-year olds to love each other as best they could, under the circumstances. They learned, they laughed, and they even played together. And they really cared about one another, even though eight-year olds don't usually say that they care about one another out loud.

But don't forget. There was an exception to all of this. Philip was not really a part of the group. Philip did not choose, nor did he want to be different. He just was. And that was the way things were.

His teacher had a marvelous idea for his class the Sunday after Easter. You know those things that pantyhose come in...the containers that look like great big eggs? The teacher collected ten of them. The children loved it when he brought them into the room and gave one to each child.

It was a beautiful spring day, and the assignment was for each child to go outside, find a symbol for new life, put it into the egg, and bring it back to the classroom. They would then open and share their new life symbols one by one.

It was glorious. It was confusing. It was wild. They ran all around the church grounds, gathering their symbols and then they returned to the classroom.

They put all the eggs on a table, and then the teacher began to open them. All the children gathered around the table. He opened one and there was a flower, and they ooh-ed and aah-ed. He opened another and there was a little butterfly. "Beautiful!" The girls all said. He opened another and there was a rock. And as third-graders will, some laughed, and some said, "That's crazy! How's a rock supposed to be like new life?" But the smart boy who'd put it in there spoke up: "That's mine. And I knew all of you would get flowers and buds and leaves and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me, that's new life." They all laughed.

The teacher said something about the wisdom of eight-year olds and opened the next one. There was nothing inside. The children, as eight-year olds will, said, "That's not fair. That's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right." Then the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down. "It's mine," Philip said, "It's mine."

And the children said, "You don't ever do things right, Philip. There's nothing there!" "I did so do it right!" Philip said. "I did do it right. The tomb is empty!"

There was silence, a very full silence. And I want to tell you that a miracle happened that day. From that time on, it was different. Philip suddenly became a part of that group of eight-year old children. They took him in. He was set free from the tomb of his differences.

Philip died that next summer. His family had known since the time he was born that he wouldn't live out a full life span. Many other things were wrong with his little body. And so with an infection that most normal children could have quickly shrugged off, Philip died. At his memorial service, nine eight-year old children marched up to the altar, not with flowers to cover over the stark reality of his death...but nine eight-year olds, along with their Sunday School teacher, marched right up to that altar, and laid on it an empty egg...an empty, old, discarded pantyhose egg.

For the tomb is empty!

As the gospel of John tells us, on Sunday, the third day, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and much to her amazement saw that the stone had been rolled away from the front of the tomb. The tomb that had held Christ's body was now empty!

Mary didn't know what had happened, so she ran and brought back two of the disciples, telling them that Jesus' body had been taken from the tomb, and she did not know where it had been taken. When the disciples arrived, we're told that the other disciple arrived first. He looked in the tomb, but didn't enter. Peter was the first to enter the tomb, and he saw the burial clothes lying there, but no body, for Christ was gone. Then, when the other disciple entered he not only saw, he also believed. They still did not understand the scripture and why Christ had been put to death and now had risen from the dead, he didn't understand, but he believed, and he knew that somehow a miracle had taken place!

As Mary stood there weeping outside of the tomb, two angels appeared, and then suddenly Jesus was standing there, although Mary did not recognize Him - just as we often fail to recognize Christ's presence in our midst. Mary knew Jesus well, but still she somehow failed to recognize him, until as Mary spoke with Jesus, she suddenly recognized who he was and she knew that she had "seen the Lord", even though she still did not understand the miracle that had happened.

The Easter message is a message that compels us to believe, just as the disciple whom Jesus loved believed. It is a message that compels us to recognize Christ's presence in our midst, just as Mary finally recognized Jesus and realized that she had seen the Lord. It is not just a message of an empty tomb, rather it is a message which speaks of God's love for us. God loves us so much that the evil and the hatred which put Jesus on the cross did not have the last word, just as they do not have the last word today. God loves us so much that no matter how powerful the wrong seems, it will not triumph in the end. God loves us so much, that nothing in all of creation, nothing in life and nothing in death will ever separate us from God's love.

What often confuses us is that we are by nature short-sighted people. We look at the few years we have here on earth - and that's all we see. We see these fifty or sixty or eighty or maybe even a hundred years, and we feel like that's all that there is, that's all that we have. If those years are filled with pain and suffering or shortened by an accident or a terminal illness, we feel like somehow God has failed us, and that we have been cheated out of the time and the quality of life that we should have had. We forget that the tomb was empty.

Jesus' death and resurrection reminds us of something that we're often reluctant to hear, even though it's good news, even though it's wonderful news, even though it's the best news that we will ever hear! Our lives here on earth are not all that there is. Our lives are not as important as we often try to make them to be, and they become even less important when we focus only on ourselves, failing to be truly concerned about our brothers and sisters who surround us.

When we truly understand that, then death is no longer the enemy, for death is not the end of everything - it is indeed a new beginning, and when we know that truth in our hearts, then our approach to life becomes very different. We no longer have to cram everything that we have ever wanted or desired into the few short years that we have here on earth. Rather, we are called to live faithfully and lovingly, knowing that the way in which we live this life becomes the very foundation for the life that is to come.

Jesus didn't stay in the tomb! God had the last word, and we are reminded once again that God is God, and we are God's creation. When we truly hear the Easter message, we can no longer go on with life as usual. All of our assumptions, all of our plans, our hopes and dreams are suddenly and dramatically changed, for the tomb is empty.

To see the stone rolled away from the tomb is to experience the power of God to radically change our lives, the kind of change that causes us to go forth saying, "I have seen the Lord!" And my life will never again be the same. God's awesome power has been displayed. We are not in control of our lives, and we have been called to follow God's path rather than our own.

Our lives are forever changed - because Jesus lives. It's not anywhere near enough to give back only part of ourselves - to worship occasionally, to follow God when it's convenient. No, in Jesus Christ God has claimed our whole self, and we are called to give it all!

Like the women at the tomb, and like little Philip, we have seen the Lord - and He lives, calling each of us to follow faithfully. That's what it means when we say, Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen indeed.

Amen.