

The Look of Love

John 20:1-18

Resurrection of the Lord/ 4th April 2021

We're not told why she woke up so early. One more sleepless night? We don't know why Mary Magdalene headed to the tomb while it was still dark. There's no reason given. She certainly wasn't searching for resurrection. John provides lots of details in his marvelous Gospel, but he doesn't tell us everything. At a rational level it doesn't make sense. What good can come from going back to a tomb? Jesus is dead. Why revisit the trauma of Friday and all its pain and sorrow and sadness? Be practical. Going back to the tomb won't bring him back.

If we're looking to reason to make sense of this story we're not going to get very far. In many respects, we must leave the realm of the rational behind and entertain the seemingly irrational; leave our thinking selves asleep in bed and venture forth into the dark unknown, guided by a hunch, by feelings, emotions that move a body to rise before the crack of dawn and go to sealed tomb.

As I was reflecting on these questions on Friday—Good Friday afternoon is always a good time to write a sermon for Easter—a memory surfaced, it just flashed by, a fleeting thought. I immediately went back nearly thirty years ago to when my mother died. On the day of her funeral there were a lot of family members and dear friends at the graveside for the interment. It was emotional, intense, and all overwhelming, followed by a reception back at the church. After things quieted down, the next day or so, I felt the need to go back to the cemetery, where a large part of my family is buried. I went alone. I just wanted to be near her even though, rationally, I knew she was not there. I sat on the ground and cried and talked with her and I remembered her presence. It was grief that led me back to that place and an enormous amount of love. A grief caused by love. It is love that gives birth to loss and absence. When we miss we love. And it's love, combined with grief, I imagine that stirred Mary from sleep and sent her running to the tomb before dawn because she wanted to return to that place alone, to get as close to him as she could.

Now, maybe this seems like an overly emotional reading of this garden scene in John. Fair enough. I hear you. I guess what I'm trying to do is use my imagination and my own personal experience to feel my way into the story, instead of thinking my way into the text, which is a very Presbyterian thing to do. And I tend to be a thinking type. In the past year, though, I've become more attuned to the feeling or emotional tone of a biblical text. Our feelings and emotions can lead us deeper into scripture, they can open up a story for us and touch us deeply, striking our hearts or breaking open our hearts open allowing us to *feel* something new and maybe, then, think something new about God, ourselves, our neighbor, our perceptions of reality and the world.

Ian McGilchrist, a British psychiatrist who was at Johns Hopkins for a time, argues that it is emotions that lead us to discover and know the world. There's a wisdom and knowledge that can only be known through emotions and feelings and not by thought. "The mode we choose to

understand something determines what we find,” he writes. “Emotion is inseparable from the body in which it is felt, and emotion is also the basis for an engagement with the world.”¹

Look, or better, feel your way into the Easter story. Now, you might distrust your feelings or maybe you’re afraid of letting your emotions get the best of you—which is a curious and strange turn of phrase, if you think about it, as if emotions have the power to steal something from you. Stay close to the text and we see that this story is full of emotion and feelings. We have grief, sadness, despair, loss, shock, surprise, confusion, anxiety, an enormous amount of movement and maybe nervous energy. Mary running to the disciples, Peter and possibly John running back to the tomb, excitement, bafflement, joy, fear, disorientation. Then Mary is left in her grief and confusion, weeping. I’m struck by the way her grief and love lead her back to the tomb and then summon her *into* the tomb. It’s grief and love that motivate her. Facing many obstacles, we could say, “nevertheless, she persisted,” and her persistence paved the way for her to eventually encounter the source of her love and her grief who comes to meet her from a place that is under or beyond or greater than the power of death, who comes toward her in love, the same love that moved toward her when he was alive, a love that was recognized and then felt because it was familiar—or was it felt, *first*, and then recognized. She had felt that kind of love before, seen the world through that kind of love. She recognized herself as seen by those eyes of love. “I have seen the Lord,” she went and proclaimed to the disciples. “I have *seen* the Lord!” And I could imagine her saying to herself, “*I have been seen by the Lord. I have been seen by the Risen One. The Resurrected Lord has seen me.*”

As poet Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) reminds us, “Unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see a thing at all.”²



That's what we've been trying to explore and touch throughout the season of Lent, asking the question, what does love look like? We've had a large, red heart on the church lawn for most of Lent. It now has smaller hearts in different colors with words describing what love looks like. It's a beautiful, remarkable testimony. One heart reads "Grief." Last Sunday in the children's sermon, Dorothy Boulton beautifully summarized the events of holy week, placing before her palm fronds, then a chalice, a cross, and an image of an empty tomb, and she said, gesturing to the symbols, "This is what love looks like." And all of these symbols, the events of Holy Week, the journey of Lent, all that we celebrate and bear witness to today, all that compels us and draws us to worship today, whether we come in our faith or in our doubt because we can't quite give up

on this story, because all the pain and brokenness of the world, despite the brokenness of the church and the horrible things done by people of faith, we're still drawn back to the goodness and graciousness and power of Christ's dying and undying love for us.

This is what has moved me deeply this year spending a lot of time in John's Gospel throughout Lent: the sure and steady love of Jesus shines through his Gospel, which is the love of God. It's seen in God's love, even for the forces in the world that hinder and obstruct God's love, what John calls the *kosmos*. "For God so love the *kosmos*, that God sent the Son...not to condemn the *kosmos* but to save it" (Jn. 3:16-17). In the Farewell Discourses, chapters 14-17, you can see how much Jesus really loved his disciples, provided for them, cared for them, held them, wept with them, wept for them (Jn. 11). "Having loved his own who were in the *kosmos*," we're told, "he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1). Jesus commanded us to love one another, as found in this Gospel (Jn. 13:34-35). He showed us how and he showed us that we were worthy of love and worthy of saving from all that tries to destroy God's love in the world. You can see it in the way he washes his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:1-17). It's praying for his disciples in love, praying for us, calling his disciples into the divine relationship, even calling us to share in his glory, to share in this love (Jn. 17). It's the cross overcoming the power of death, forcing even death to yield to life—the love embodied in the Risen One, God's love, the ground under our feet all the time, a love that permeates the unknown depths of the psyche and the farthest reach of the universe, the love, as Dante (1265-1321) said in the *Comedia*, "that moves the sun and other stars."

This is the love and our own, personal experience of this love, which courses through our bodies, which roots and grounds us as children of the Risen One, and then sends us running into the world to bear witness to all of it. Because there are a lot of people who have yet to figure out or experience this grace, the power of this love. What it all comes down to is that we are all people just want to be loved. Isn't that what we all want? And yet we strive after it and we remain frustrated when we can receive it or see it. Fifty-three years ago, this day, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was assassinated in Memphis, because the world couldn't stomach one who comes in the name of love. The trauma related to the death of George Floyd last May in Minneapolis is being revisited and intensified with the murder trial now underway. We've heard and seen the testimony of the trial this past week. Asian-Americans are fearful and scared. The sin of racism is on full display. Fear and anxiety abound.

And, yet here we are on this Easter morning proclaiming, "He is risen! Which is another way of saying, *Nevertheless!* Nevertheless—grace is always *Nevertheless!* This year of so much pain and loss and suffering, perhaps we will experience and really feel that *Nevertheless*, feel the redemptive power of God's love calling the church to embody this love in a radically new way, especially for those who have never known such love or have forgotten what it feels like. "This is the central Christian mystery," Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) once said. "Life has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for."³

Friends, we are witnesses of the crucified, wound-bearing, transforming love of God that sends us out into this world that still puts love to death. But we go, nevertheless, because the Risen One sends us there. Writing in today's [New York Times](#), Esau McCaulley calls this the terrifying prospect of Easter, that we are sent into the world with our grief and with our love to

the same world that crucified and continues to crucify Jesus. But we go into the world with what he calls “a dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love.”⁴

“I have seen the Lord.” We have seen the Lord. His look of love has given us new eyes to look out and see a broken, beautiful world worthy—*worthy*—of God’s love. Thanks be to God. Christ is risen! Risen indeed! Alleluia!



Fra Angelico (1395-1455), *Noli Me Tangere* (Do not hold on to me)

¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

² Cited in John O’Donohue, *Änam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (Harper Perennial, 1998), 65. I also recommend *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), and Kathleen Raine, *William Blake* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

³ Flannery O’Conner, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 146.

⁴ Esau McCaulley, “The Unsettling Message of Easter,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/opinion/easter-celebration.html?referringSource=articleShare>