

“Seeing Jesus”

First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-17

New Testament Lesson: John 20:11-18

(Ha-cin-ta) Jacinta Bolwer posted the following article Monday on ScienceAlert.com: Less than a week ago, the world was blown away by the first-ever direct image of a black hole.... But this now world-famous object doesn't really have an official name, although a few options are now vying for legitimacy. ... In collaboration with astronomers, a Hawaiian language professor has now given (the black hole designated M87*) a more poetic name. ... 'Pō-we-hi'... It means “embellished dark source of unending creation....”

Embellished dark source of unending creation. That does sound poetic, and godlike. God is the source of unending creation, and some would say our beliefs about God have been embellished, that is overstated or inflated beyond reality. And there are so many aspects of God that are seen only dimly; not yet in the full light of God's glory.

Here's another news story making the rounds today, as posted on Hebrew scrolls and in sacred books going back centuries:

Less than 2,000 years ago, the world was blown away by the first-ever direct image of the Risen Lord. But this now world-famous person doesn't really have a visible body, although millions of people profess his legitimacy. In collaboration with history professors, Bible scholars have given the Lord a more personal name – Jesus of Nazareth. It means “to deliver” or “to rescue.”

Thanks these two news stories, we know that the black hole in outer space is now visible for all to see, in the photographs taken. And we know about another black hole visible for all to see that points – not to outer space – but to Jesus. That black hole is the empty tomb.

And yet, there are those who doubt its significance and others who question its legitimacy. And that's understandable. Had there been only an empty tomb, we may have thought grave robbers took the body of the man named Jesus. But we have the testimony of Mary and the other disciples. Had there been only the testimony of Mary and the other disciples, we may have thought they made it up to sooth their broken hearts. But we have the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians about more than 500 people seeing the Risen Lord with their own eyes, most of whom were still alive and telling about it at the time.

Had there been only this report of 500 people seeing the Risen Lord, we may have thought it was just Paul trying to add proof to faith. But we have millions upon millions of people in this world today who stake their lives on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth lived, was crucified, buried, and is risen.

And still, if the belief of millions and millions was all we had to support our faith in the Risen Lord, we might doubt what we know to be true. And we do. There is not a Christian alive today who does not on some level at some time find his or her faith wavering. And yet, our faith lives on. That is the miracle of Easter – that Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

For us living in the time between when Christ had died and when Christ will come again, we are in constant need of the Risen Lord. So we rely on what evidence of Jesus there is, knowing that it is based in faith and susceptible to doubt.

It's like the time the Archbishop answered the phone at the Vatican, saying, "How can I help you?" After listening for a moment, he turns white as a sheet and says, "Yes sir. I'll get him, sir. Please hold." Outside the Pope's door, the Archbishop knocks gently. When the Pope answers, the Archbishop says, "Your Holiness, there's a telephone call that can't wait, but first, I have good news and bad news." "Give me the good," says the Pope. "Sir, it's Jesus on the phone. It's the second coming, and he wants to talk to you." "My goodness!" says the Pope. "What is the bad news?" "Your holiness.... He's calling from Salt Lake City." Of course, we know that Jesus isn't a Mormon or Presbyterian or anything but the Son of God. Evidence of Jesus – based in faith, but susceptible to doubt.

Our primary evidence of Jesus Christ– the evidence that gave rise to our faith – is what we read in the Bible. Let's look at the Easter experience of Mary as reported by the Apostle John. And maybe, just maybe, we'll come away with a stronger faith, a clearer way forward, and greater hope for our lives and for our world. John tells us that "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb" of Jesus. The Lord whom she knew and loved – and whom she had seen with her own eyes – was dead, lost to her forever, as far as she knew.

At that moment, she had no reason to remember and trust his words of assurance, those cryptic sayings of his, when he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," speaking of the temple of his body (Jn 2:18-22), ... or when he said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!," because Peter had argued with Jesus when he "began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem ..., and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matt. 16:21-23), ... or when he brought Lazarus back from the dead, saying, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25). Having heard and experienced all that, still Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

Well, we can relate to that. We all have those areas of life that cause us doubt and pain – those regrets for things we've done or left undone, those people we've lost to death or time or distance, or maybe it's our financial mishaps, broken friendships, unfulfilled goals and dreams.

We stand before the emptiness of these tragedies and, like Mary, we weep, inside and out. What can possibly help us in a moment like that? For Mary, it all began with the two angels dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. They say to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she said this, she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus.

Notice that Jesus comes to her in her time of need even though she doesn't recognize it, can't see things clearly in the midst of her hurt and need. The same is true for us. When we are grieving a loss, drowning in regret, laid flat and heartbroken, Jesus comes to us, whether we notice it or not. Perhaps, our difficulty recognizing Jesus working in our lives is because in Jesus is not some quick fix sent to us by God.

He spent three decades living among us in the flesh. Three years of earthly ministry. Three days in the tomb. And thirty words exchanged between Jesus and Mary, when he also says to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" "Sir," she says, thinking he's the gardener, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Thirty words pass between them before Jesus says the one word that makes all the difference in the word, "Mary!" Hearing Jesus call her by name, she turns and says to him, in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)." And with that her heart is mended.

Not right away. Not with some quick fix. But over time, as she draws closer to Jesus, recognizes him for who he is. Mary's heart is mended, her hope is restored, her way made clear, her vision sharpened, and her purpose in life made certain.

And so it is with us. Jesus doesn't come to us – or Mary – and say, "Stop your crying, pick yourself up, it's nothing, time heals all wounds, or whatever other trite, dismissive, unhelpful and often hurtful things someone has said to you during hard times.

No, Jesus and the church comes alongside us to be with us, through the hurt – the spiritual, physical, emotional and relational pain that he, too, experienced during his earthly ministry. Thank God we have Jesus and the church he raised up to come alongside us and comfort us in the midst of our doubts and hard times, and when we're ready, to point us in the right direction, so we can move forward.

Mary did not stay with those angels, just sitting there in the tomb of her grief. Instead, she left her grief with them and went looking for the Lord.

Whatever you have been clinging to over the years, it is safe for you to leave it in the hands of those angels in the Tomb of Jesus. Whenever you are ready, you can leave it with them. Jesus is here with you, waiting for you to turn to him, waiting to call you by name, to mended your heart, to restore your hope, to make clear your way forward, to sharpen your vision, and make certain your purpose in life.

In response to Jesus' presence in our lives, let us all, like Mary, announce to the world in word and deed, "I have seen the Lord!" Alleluia and amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We thank you, O God of great love, for the gift of life on this joyous Easter morning.

When we face tombs of darkness and despair, may we stop, listen and hear the voice of Jesus say, "Do not be afraid; fear not, for I am with you always, even to the end of time."

And for us and all people, O God, let the resurrection remind us that, because Christ lives, we live in the fullness of life also.

Let us bring the gift of new life in the form of hope to those who live in despair.

Let Risen Lord inspire us to bring friendship to the lonely, forgiveness to the repentant, kindness to the mean-spirited, calm to the angry, hospitality to those who feel unworthy, encouragement to those whose strength is waning, peace to the hostile, a helping hand to those who feel overwhelmed, acceptance to the disenfranchised, a welcoming smile to those who are strangers in our midst.

Our joy overflows on this day of new life; may our hallelujahs echo in our hearts always, as we daily celebrate the presence of a loving God who gave his Son that we might have life and have it abundantly.

It is in his name of the Risen Lord that we pray, as he taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**