

“I have seen the Lord!”

“You probably do not remember the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. During his day he was as powerful a man as there was on earth. A Russian Communist leader he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda (which by the way means truth), and was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today. There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of men’s faith. ‘Are there any questions?’ Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: ‘CHRIST IS RISEN!’ En masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: ‘HE IS RISEN INDEED!’” (“Why I Believe in the Resurrection” on Sermons.com)

On this anniversary of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we join in the declaration, “He is Risen!” Today’s Scripture reports Mary Magdalene was called by our Risen Lord to testify to his original male disciples how she had **“seen the Lord”**! Even though Jesus’ instructions to Mary went against the norms of then Jewish society, he gave them and, astonishingly, she actually followed them and evidently told the male disciples, **“I have seen the Lord!”** But, how did Mary come to be the first human witness of the Resurrection and thus receive the Risen Lord’s call to give testimony?

After Mary found Jesus’ empty tomb, she hurried to tell the disciples and two of them, Peter and supposedly the author of the Gospel of John ran to check out the tomb. On some other occasion we can focus on their experience on that first Easter morning but for this morning, let’s closely examine what Mary did when Peter and the disciple **“whom Jesus loved”** left the tomb.

Instead of going away with the two male disciples, **“Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ they asked her.**

She answered, ‘They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!’” Interestingly enough, Mary had basically said the same thing to Peter and the beloved disciple. Mary’s focus was on her deceased Lord – not on someone stealing his body or the political implications.

“Then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus. ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ Jesus asked her. ‘Who is it that you are looking for?’”

“She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, ‘If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.’” Notice, Mary is still concerned with the body of Jesus – only this time she assume the gardener had taken him somewhere else. Remember, he was placed in a borrowed tomb. Whether or not it was because Jesus recognized Mary’s commitment to him and to his body’s welfare or whether Jesus could no longer allow her to grieve over his death, the Reading tersely explains how he revealed himself to her. **“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’”** She was forced to recognize him!

Maybe it was because he called her by name or it could have been the way he spoke her name – the tone of his voice or his accent. **“She turned toward him and said in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ (This means ‘Teacher.’)”** A new reality was breaking into Mary’s consciousness!

“A new pastor was visiting one of his church members who was in the hospital. The pastor was a young man, fresh out of seminary and still wet behind the ears as a minister. He was visiting this elderly man named Joe, and Joe was extremely ill. He wanted to talk to his pastor about his funeral service and the pastor wanted to talk about anything else – the weather, football, politics, or anything else he could think of.

Finally, the pastor asked, ‘Joe, doesn’t it bother you? Aren’t you frightened?’ Joe smiled and said, ‘Preacher, I know I’m not going to make it, but I’m not afraid. I have a confession to make. I’ve taken a peek at the back of the book.’

‘What do you mean?’ the minister asked.

Joe said, ‘You didn’t know me 10 years ago when I had my first heart attack. They called it cardiac arrest. I can remember the medical team thinking I was dead. I can also remember the tremendous feeling of being surrounded by God’s love. I was revived by the doctors, but ever since that day I have been unafraid to die. I’ve been there and it doesn’t frighten me. I know that one day soon I am going to go to sleep and I believe that when I awaken, I will, once again, be surrounded by God’s love.’” (Robert L. Allen, *His Finest Days: Ten Sermons for Holy Week and the Easter Season*, CSS Publishing Company) He had come to experience a new reality, just as Mary did when the Risen Lord spoke her name!

After Jesus revealed himself to Mary – transformed her grief into awesome joy, he turned his focus to the needs of the male disciples to also experience the new reality! Jesus instructed Mary, ***“But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to Him Who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.”***

Especially because of the social mores against women being leaders in the male dominated Jewish society of almost 2,000 years ago, Mary faced a daunting calling. How could she fulfill Jesus’ call to testify about seeing her Risen Lord? I found the following story to be a somewhat humorous answer to that question.

“A first year student in a Catholic seminary was told by the dean that he should plan to preach the sermon in chapel the following day. He had never preached a sermon before, he was nervous and afraid, and he stayed up all night, but in the morning, he didn’t have a sermon. He stood in the pulpit, looked out at his classmates and said, ‘Do you know what I am going to say?’ All of them shook their heads ‘no’ and he said ‘Neither do I. The service has ended. Go in peace.’

The dean was not happy. ‘I’ll give you another chance tomorrow, and you had better have a sermon.’ Again he stayed up all night; and again he couldn’t come up with a sermon. Next morning, he stood in the pulpit and asked ‘Do you know what I am going to say?’ The students all nodded their heads ‘yes.’ ‘Then there is no reason to tell you’ he said. ‘The service has ended. Go in peace.’

Now the dean was angry. ‘I’ll give you one more chance; if you don’t have a sermon tomorrow, you will be asked to leave the seminary.’ Again, no sermon came. He stood in the pulpit the next day and asked ‘Do you know what I am going to say?’ Half of the students nodded ‘yes’ and the other half shook their heads ‘no.’ The student preacher then announced ‘Those who know, tell those who don’t know. The service has ended. Go in peace.’

The seminary dean walked over to the student, put his arm over the student’s shoulders, and said ‘Those who know, tell those who don’t know. Today, the gospel has been proclaimed.’” (Steven Molin, “Four Truths and a Lie”)

The Gospel of John does not share what went through Mary’s mind after she was given her call to testify to the Lord’s male disciples. Instead, the Scripture continues, ***“So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her.”*** Kate Matthews Huey responds, “We know, from the end of today’s passage, that Jesus still felt it necessary to commission Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples (the community, really, not just the small band of ‘apostles’) the good news. One wonders about the confidence he has in the disciples’ ability to carry through even after seeing the empty grave.”

Huey continues, “This is a good moment to consider in greater depth why Jesus entrusted such marvelous news to a woman, of all people, something quite remarkable, given the status of women then and, ironically, ever since, in the eyes of the churches, despite Mary’s faithful abiding, and her witness to the rest. Mary stands for even more than herself here, writes John “J. Pilch: ‘This special knowledge, given by Jesus uniquely to Mary Magdalene, makes her a ‘typical’ or representative character.’ She has become an ‘insider, someone who is definitely ‘in the know ... an ‘enlightened’ person [who] does not depend upon the group or any other person for her special knowledge of Jesus. ... How,’ Pilch wonders, did our allegedly patriarchal ancestors ever accept the help of women in making sense out of an empty tomb?’” (Sermon Seeds Reflection by Kate Matthews Huey)

Mary Magdalene had ***“seen the Lord”!*** The Risen Jesus Christ, the Son of God, empowered her to perceive and be part of the new reality – to be a new creature in Christ. Because Mary and the other witnesses of the Risen Lord had seen him and went on to bear witness – you and I can share in the memory of their seeing the Raised Lord! You and I can also share in being transformed to the new reality – become citizens of the Kingdom of God – inherit the life of the eternal – become children of God! You and I are also called to share the Good News with our family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and everyone we meet who is in need of the new reality of the God’s Forgiveness, Healing, Acceptance, and Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love – see the Lord! Amen.