

## Two Obstacles of Easter

Year A – Easter; 9 April 2023

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

Today Mary helps us see the Lord. And I'm so grateful she does. In John's Gospel, Mary appears only twice, but her appearances are at the climax of the story. Her first appearance is at the foot of the cross, standing with Jesus's mother, bearing with her the pain of Jesus's torture and death. Her second and final appearance is narrated in our reading today: she's confused by an empty tomb and greeted by Jesus, whom she mistook to be the gardener.

I wonder how she mistook him. It is not that she didn't know Jesus. What kept her from seeing her resurrected Lord? And what is it today that causes us to not see the resurrected Lord?

On this Easter Sunday, I'd like to explore two obstacles that obstruct our seeing and believing the gospel. My hunch is that one of these obstacles is more substantial for you than the other, and today we hear stories of how each are overcome by the earliest Christians.

The first obstacle that obstructs our seeing and believing the gospel is death. The second is resurrection. These two obstacles, the cross and the empty tomb, are what Christians call "the mystery of Easter." I'd like to suggest that these two obstacles – the cross and the empty tomb – pose problems for our seeing and believing, but perhaps today these obstacles can help us testify with Mary that we have seen the Lord.

Let's start with the cross. You'll remember that for Peter, the cross was the main obstacle to him embracing Jesus. In each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah of God, but fails to see what the cross has to do with Jesus being messiah. Each of the Gospels deal with the obstacle of Jesus's death in its own kind of way, but what I want to explore today is how death and discipleship go hand in hand because in Jesus, the divine died. The Divine. Died.

That Jesus died poses a number of problems for us Christians, and it has since the beginning of Christian reflection on the cross. How is it that the eternal God died, or as Peter puts it earlier in the book of Acts, that the Author of Life was killed? Isn't that a contradiction? Over the centuries, Christians have offered a number of proposals for how this could be so. Some suggested Jesus only appeared to die, because he only appeared to be human. This gnostic view was unhelpful because it failed to affirm the full humanity of Jesus. Other Christians suggested that in Jesus, God the Father died. This view was determined to be unhelpful because it failed to identify and distinguish between the three persons of the Trinity.

But the cross isn't just a fine-grained theological problem. It's also an obvious one that involves both a "can" and a "why." How *can* God, the Creator of the Universe, die? *Why* would God, the Lord of All, submit to death? But the story of the gospel is that in Jesus, God found a way to die, and in Jesus, God absorbed death into divinity.

Think about how this is true. It requires a mental stretch, but it's worth it. In Jesus God absorbs death into God's own life. Perhaps that is why the cross is such a substantial obstacle for seeing and believing the gospel: it's such a profound reality. It was an obvious obstacle to Peter, who had been praying psalms like Psalm 118 which announces, "The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: 'The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.' I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD." This Psalm declares that God is strong, mighty, our Savior, victorious, and valiant. That God is triumphant, God cannot, would not, accept death for you, for me, and of course, would not accept death for God's self. Right? Wrong.

Peter and about every Jewish person with him knew that God was mighty to save and it was unimaginable that God would submit to death. Maybe you're like Peter too. By enduring the cross, God reveals God's "position on death" and positions us for a life of cross bearing too. This is why pain and suffering are part of our discipleship, because in Christ, God suffered and died.

This is why Paul says that the cross is foolishness to the gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. And this is why Peter's conversion in our Acts reading is so striking. Conversion is ongoing and comes in steps. Like love. This is not Peter's first conversion. Peter had earlier come to affirm that Jesus was "put to death by hanging him on a tree." He's come a long way from being rebuked as Satan and put behind Jesus for rejecting the cross. Peter's conversion today is that he came to affirm that Jesus's lynching was for all people, not just the Jews.

That Jesus was hung on a tree is not lost on theologian James Cone. What Cone helps us see is how the cross was a first-century lynching. It was a public spectacle orchestrated by the Roman government to announce what happens to so-called messiahs and outsiders who threaten the established order. Jesus was lynched. That Jesus was lynched, Cone explains, helps us see the lynchings of Black Americans as recrucifixions.

As a quick aside, I think we should read Cone's book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, together. We're reading it in my Methods in Wesleyan Theology class, and every time I read this book, I see Jesus more clearly. I think you will too, but it's a difficult road, and a road that leads right to the cross, the tree on which Jesus was lynched.

I suspect that this exploration of the cross as an obstacle to our seeing and believing the gospel is somewhat obvious to you. Maybe you can identify with Peter here. The cross seems so weak, so beneath God. And yet God endured the cross in Christ. And because of this, we must endure the cross too. The cross not only is part of the gospel, but it's also the outline through which we see Jesus. It took Peter a while to see the cross as the shape of God with us, and today he and his friend saw how it and the empty tomb together announce the gospel of our Crucified Savior.

A second obstacle to seeing and believing the gospel is the empty tomb. It's interesting to me that all that it took was seeing an empty tomb, and the beloved disciple "saw and believed." It seems that the empty tomb was all he needed to see and believe that God had conquered death by resurrecting Jesus. The beloved disciple and Peter found an empty tomb and left that tomb as believers. Their deepest held beliefs about the strength and might of God were confirmed by the empty tomb. But not Mary Magdalene. She was convinced the empty tomb was a misdirection. A false hope. A hoax.

Twice in our reading today, first with Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, and second with the angels in the tomb, Mary accuses others of stealing Jesus's body. Whether she's accusing the Romans or the Jews, the Gospel is not clear, but what is clear is that she believes there's some nefarious work afoot. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." By the time she's met the angels, she's accusing the gardener of stealing his body. Mary doesn't entertain the idea that the empty tomb means resurrection. It must be the sinister work of someone once more mocking her teacher and Lord.

We don't know much about Mary Magdalene. As I mentioned earlier, she appears only one other time in John's Gospel, and it's at the foot of the cross. So why does she get top billing as the person who gets to see Jesus?

I think it's because John wants us to see Jesus as the good Shepherd and Mary as his sheep who he knows by name. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who "calls his own sheep by name" (10:3). Notice when Mary's eyes and ears were opened and finally, she saw and heard her risen Lord. It was only after her Shepherd called her by name. In calling her by name, Jesus connects Mary's past with God's loving future in this moment of encounter with Jesus.

Mary's slowness in seeing Jesus displays the challenge of the empty tomb. Mary is one for whom the cross has been real, far too close. By introducing Mary at the cross, John presents her as someone who knows the tragedy, pain, and suffering of this world. Mary sees Jesus as the one the Romans lynched on a tree to terrorize any sheep who might follow this Shepherd. Mary sees Jesus as the one who was persecuted and tortured by those in power to exercise and exhibit their domination. Mary sees Jesus as the Teacher who made himself last and least, and got killed for it. Is there good news in a world of such pain and suffering, for a Shepherd and sheep who have been the target of such domination and oppression?

For Mary, the empty tomb was beyond her wildest imagination because for her, the cross was such an overwhelming reality she had a hard time seeing past it. Maybe you can identify with Mary here. The cross seemed to discredit any possibility of release, liberation, or victory in our tragic world. So while Peter had a hard time seeing a cross in the life of a Mighty Messiah, Mary had a hard time seeing an empty tomb of victory and liberation in a world of such pain and suffering. These two obstacles – the cross and the empty tomb – are the obstacles of Easter and the mysteries of the gospel.

But the cross is the shape of God's life in our violent and rebellious world. And the empty tomb is God's answer to our world's foolishness. Together the cross and resurrection are God's answer to the worst this world could do: kill God's only Son. We get this wrong when we think of one without the other. Peter needed to face the cross. Without the cross, we can't see Jesus. Mary needed to face the empty tomb. Without the empty tomb, we can't see Jesus. We need to face the cross and the empty tomb to see Jesus.

This Easter, you are invited to see and believe in a power this world does not know and cannot overcome. Even more, you are invited today to see and believe the Good Shepherd, who knows you by name and walks with you to the cross and into the arms of the Living God.

What are obstacles to discipleship for so many of us, can become this very day, gifts from the Good Shepherd to form and shape you for friendship with God forever.