

Who are you looking for?

Sermon 180 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 9, 2023, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-21

For the past six weeks, our gatherings have been framed by questions.

Who will we listen to?
How do we begin again?
Where will we find renewal?
Who sinned? / What do we need to unlearn?
Can these bones live? / What is giving us hope?

And last week, on Palm Sunday as we considered the two processions of Pilate and Jesus we asked: Where are we headed? Today, as we approach the tomb early on this Easter morn, our question is: *Who are we looking for?*

Some of you, perhaps having read the bulletin, have already answered that question in your mind. You may not have blurted it out loud but because you are all good Christian people who have read your Bibles and attended Sunday school, you know the answer to this question, especially on Easter Sunday is: *Jesus!*

Who are you looking for? Jesus! Well, have you found him yet? Maybe you felt Jesus draw near in the Easter proclamation *Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!* Maybe it was the opening Hymn: "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" That one gets me every time. Maybe it was the grace conveyed in the words of confession and the promise of forgiveness.

These are the ways we have felt the promise and hope of resurrection before. These are the ways we have drawn closer to Jesus in previous days and so, these are the ways we look for Jesus now... And hopefully, by now we've all caught a glimpse...

Alleluia!

They say you find what you're looking for... especially when your mind fixates on something... Have y'all ever had an experience like that? Where all of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, something starts popping up all over the place?

It happened to me last year in the fall, for whatever reason everywhere I went I saw Dallas Cowboys propaganda. It was after a conversation Justin and I had on the couch one night.

I don't even remember what prompted it but we randomly remembered the "Starter Jackets" we both had in Middle School. They were these trendy jackets or coats that were really puffy and had the emblems of a sports team. As we remembered that old fashion trend we had to chuckle at the irony of us both - him being from east Texas and me being from central North Carolina - choosing Dallas Cowboys starter jackets. What are the odds?!

Well, after that conversation, that blue star logo started popping up everywhere! On bumper stickers and back windows of vehicles that passed on the road. On the shirts of runners I'd see on the Neuse River Trail. I even noticed, when visiting my sister in Mooresville that not just one but both of her neighbors, the houses on both sides of hers, had some kind of Dallas Cowboys Merchandise out front - either on their porch or as a flag adorning their yard. It was so weird. It might have made sense if we lived in Dallas, or even in Texas! But to see that much Cowboy stuff here in North Carolina was really, really strange.

Turns out, this phenomenon, when the one random thing you've just noticed, experienced or been told about suddenly crops up constantly... [giving] you the feeling that *out of nowhere*, pretty much everyone else cares about that specific thing too... has a name... It is called the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. Also known as frequency illusion. In short we tend to see what we are looking for because our minds are predisposed, preconditioned, practiced and poised to see it. I wasn't seeing Dallas Cowboys regalia because the Cowboys were once again "America's Team" like they were in the 90s... There was no cosmic impulse or divine directive even for me to renew my love for the Cowboys (my allegiance for them waned when they let Emmitt Smith go about 20 years ago.)

I was seeing Cowboys symbols everywhere because after all that time, my mind was thinking about them again. I saw the Cowboys everywhere I went because I was looking for the Cowboys everywhere I went.

So who are we looking for today? Jesus? You say?

From every rational perspective that seems like quite a stretch. The last time anyone saw Jesus was nearly two thousand years ago - and the eyewitness accounts sort of contradict one another. Some saw him outside the empty tomb, others on the road to Emmaus, still others on the shore of Galilee and in the upper room. Some descriptions imply that Jesus was recognized only by his voice saying the name of the disciple. Some imply that he was known by his actions - the breaking of the bread (specifically). Still, others insist that he

was visibly recognizable and physically touchable. Remember Thomas who saw and touched his wounds?

At best, the resurrection accounts agree that there was something different about Jesus after the grave. Perhaps we should concede that those who saw Jesus last - the disciples - had a hard time knowing what they were looking for when it came to the resurrection. I mean, Jesus did tell them all of this was going to happen, but it's almost like they didn't completely believe him. To be fair, they had not read the Gospels ahead of time, to know the ending, like we do. They were *living* the resurrection in real-time.

It certainly stands to reason that the disciples had a lot going on. A lot that might have clouded their vision when it came to seeing and recognizing the risen Christ. In the days leading up to the crucifixion, everyone close to Jesus had experienced tragedy and trauma the likes of which, most of us could never imagine.

It was just a matter of hours between the Passover meal they shared with Jesus, the one where he broke the bread, blessed the cup, before he washed their feet as an ultimate act of service, humility, and love.

It was just a matter of hours between the meal and the moment when the beautiful intimacy of the table came to an end, and the whole world came crashing down upon them. Jesus was arrested, betrayed by one of their own.

Things got really scary really quickly because what Jesus had been telling them would happen did indeed happen. Jesus lost his life. "Anyone who wants to find their life has to lose it." Jesus used to say.

I bet none of them imagined it would happen quite this way.

Even though the disciples were trying to watch, listen, and learn, they could never have been prepared for what their eyes would behold in those final days. The violence, the death, the trauma of losing a friend in such a way. So of course, when Mary sits weeping "at the empty tomb, the picture she has formed in her mind is one of tragedy." How could we (or she) expect anything else? Her eyes had seen so much pain. Her mind had learned that people can surprise you, that disciples are not always loyal, that sometimes good doesn't seem to prevail; sometimes Love doesn't win. Sometimes even the Son of God can be arrested, beaten, and nailed to a cross.

These were significant, life-altering lessons for her and they changed the scope of her vision from hope to despair. In these earliest Easter moments, Mary and the other disciples forgot how to see the way that Jesus taught them to see.

Who were they looking for? In many ways it seems like they were looking for the Jesus of the tomb. If faith could be worn as glasses then it seems they all forgot to put them on that day when they went to visit the tomb. Ahh, now maybe that's a good metaphor for us today, especially given that we are in John's Gospel.

Seeing is a major theme in John's Gospel, the first half is often called the "Book of Signs." It has earned this name because it contains so many miracle stories. The other Gospels also include these stories but John's approach is special. John wants us to see and believe. For John, the miracles that Jesus performs not only prove Jesus' power, but they also provoke belief that Jesus is indeed the incarnate son of God.

We see this theme growing from the very beginning of the fourth Gospel: John the Baptist tells of his experience baptizing Jesus saying: *I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.* Then, as Jesus calls the first disciples he says: *Come, and you will see.* After the first miracle, the one where Jesus turned water into wine, John says that the disciples: *Saw and put their faith in him.* Then to Nicodemus the Pharisee (who comes to Jesus with questions in the middle of the night), Jesus says: *No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, she becomes the first evangelist of the Good News telling everyone in her town to: *Come and see!* Later, Jesus heals a man who'd been unable to walk for thirty-eight years. And after receiving criticism for healing on the Sabbath - (breaking with the tradition and also breaking the rules of the religious institution) - Jesus finds the man and says to him: *See, you have been made well!*

All along the way, Jesus has been showing the disciples how to see resurrection when it happens. In each of these cases, in each healing story, Jesus brings new life to those who are facing tombs of their own. Tombs of legalism and tombs of broken relationships, tombs of illness, and tombs of isolation. Jesus heals them all, making broken people whole again and restoring their place in beloved community.

Jesus is teaching the disciples how to see and in their seeing, they begin to believe.

But here, in chapter 20, we come to the climax of John's Gospel. The part of the story toward which every other account has been pointing. If all the other miracles were glimpses of God's resurrection power... This is the biggest one! Here, Jesus himself is resurrected, raised from the grave, as the ultimate miracle to show just how powerful God is... more powerful than death itself!

And yet... Despite everything that Jesus told them about what was going to happen... Despite all the signs pointing to resurrection: the linen wrappings that once adorned Jesus' dead body and the special cloth that wrapped around his head... both left in the tomb as visual reminders of what they saw Jesus do with Lazarus...

Yes, despite all the signs pointing toward resurrection, Mary could only see the tomb. Perhaps Mary's imagination was so overwhelmed with pain and loss that she could not muster the strength to look beyond it. Like blinders word by a parade horse, blinders that block out everything except the one narrow path forward, Mary's grief for all that was lost, all that had been taken from her, all that had changed acted like blinders, keeping her eyes fixed on the tomb.

Maybe we have stood in those kinds of places with Mary. So stunned and shaken by grief that we have lost all capacity to see beyond it.

Maybe we, like Mary, have come to the tomb and planted our feet and our gaze in the direction of our own, limited expectations. Unable to see beyond our own blinders, maybe we struggle to find resurrection happening anywhere within us or around us. There is too much pain, too much suffering, too many closed doors and broken relationships, too many roads forward abruptly ended... Too much injustice and foolishness in this world... Maybe we see death and despair at every turn.

But as we stand in these most raw and vulnerable places, let us not forget that just beyond Mary's peripheral vision, just outside the scope of her grief, Jesus stood waiting. Jesus stood waiting, whole and alive. Remembering all that they once shared, and eager to call her by name toward their future together. Jesus stood waiting.... Reminding Mary once again to *see and believe*, as he embodies the promise of New Life that God holds for each and every one of us.

Mary just couldn't recognize him at first, perhaps because resurrection changes things - makes *all* things new - but once she rediscovered her resurrection lenses, Mary was able to see Jesus clearly!

Friends, this is the good news of Easter, that Christ is risen and is waiting for us to *see!* But it doesn't end there. Yes, the resurrection of Jesus from the grave is the BIG story, (perhaps the biggest of all). It's THE story we all came here looking for today, but let us not forget that in addition to all we have come to know and expect of this story... the Easter story is also a story of mystery, surprise, and wonder as God continues to reach and act beyond our wildest expectations.

That is what *NEW* creation is all about.

God breathing life into the valley of dry bones...

God opening eyes (and maybe even hearts) that we'd all assumed to be sealed shut.

God building a bridge between two impassable, dug-in, opposing sides.

God regathering a church after a season apart...

God making a way where there seemed to be no way.

The beauty of the flowering cross

Friends reconnecting after years of distance

The healing hug that says more than words could ever try

The tears that well up in our eyes for no reason at all when the congregation sings

Amazing Grace

The sweet, sweet Spirit that fills the Sanctuary and also our hearts on days like this one

These are glimpses of resurrection,

Daily reminders that death will not prevail,

Hate will not win... only Love can raise us from our graves

As Love has raised Jesus from his...

Christ is risen - and Christ is resurrecting all that was and is dead within us too. This is the promise and the challenge of Easter... So maybe this year, today, we can all peel off all that is limiting our vision - be it pain, grief, fear, or expectation and put on our faith glasses, our resurrection lenses, so that we can do what John is begging us to do: SEE and BELIEVE. Maybe then, we will find what we are looking for.