

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
31 March 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Easter Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“A Risen Vision”

First sermon in the Easter series, *“The World Made Well...”*

John 20:1-22

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

“I have seen the Lord!” Mary announces to the disciples.

She’s the first preacher of the Good News, you know? And it’s just a 5 word sermon. I know some of you are hoping I’ll follow her lead. *(That would be its own Easter miracle, wouldn’t it!?)*

Technically, our Easter sermon each year is just a tad longer: *“Alleluia! Christ is Risen!”* *(“He is Risen indeed!”)*

We proclaim those 8 words as if we have seen what Mary has seen, as if we ourselves have indeed had a vision of the Risen Christ, but I don’t know about you, sometimes I need some help seeing the Hope, Life, and Joy of Easter, because my vision is a bit blurred by what seems to be the lingering Lent-y-ness and Good-Friday-ness of our world.

“I have seen the Lord!” Mary says. But even her vision wasn’t

a given. It was hard for her to see anything at first.

For one, it was dark. It was really early in the morning. The kind of early where no other cars are out on the road and when you find yourself at a stoplight you wonder to yourself, *why I am sitting through this light when there are no other cars around, no one would know if I run it...* (I wouldn’t know anything about this kind of early on a Sunday.)

Mary, of course, wasn’t commuting to the tomb in a car, she was walking. In the dark. Her eyes slowly adjusting, as our eyes do, bit by bit, but without streetlights or the flashlight from a cell phone, Mary’s steps would have been careful and slow.

She would have also been tired, having just woken up from sleep, and most likely, a fitful sleep at that. You all know the kind of tired that grief brings.

It's bone-weary tired. You find yourself functioning, but you're not exactly sure how. Your body just knows what to do, but your minds not there. Grief is exhausting in a disorienting, foggy kind of way. And it hadn't just been a long night, it had been a long week! A roller coaster of emotions and events takes place between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday (can I get an Amen from the clergy and the choir?!) Indeed, it had been a long week.

Mary also would have been afraid. She was a woman. Walking in the dark. Alone. And not just any woman, but a woman who had been seen with Jesus, the man who was just crucified for his rebellion and resistance and perceived threat to the Empire. The authorities would recognize her. It's hard to see much of anything clearly when we are afraid. Fear creates pretty powerful blinders. Whatever we do see, we see with singular focus and not much else.

So we remember her for her sight, and her testimony, "*I have seen the Lord!*" but, indeed, it was hard for Mary to see on that first Easter morning.

In fact, we *know* that her sight took effort. She makes it to the tomb, and the first and *only* thing she sees is that the stone has been removed. She sees this then immediately runs away. Seeing the doorway to the tomb open doesn't spark her curiosity to look more closely; it causes her to flee, intensifying her grief.

She does what any of us would do when we see something that scares us, she finds people she trusts, who she knows well, who maybe will make her feel safe or at least less alone. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (aka John) and they return to the tomb with her. Or rather, it seems that they run far ahead, outpacing her in their fervor.

John gets there first. His sightline extends a bit beyond what Mary's did. He sees the stone rolled away, but goes a step further; he leans in to the tomb from the doorway, and looks in and he sees the linens lying there, but stops in his tracks. I almost picture this as a scene like if you accidentally open a door to a dressing room that you thought was empty, but then you see some jeans crumpled up on the floor and before you can embarrass

yourself further, you quickly back away saying, “*I’m sorry, didn’t know anyone was in here!*”

John sees just enough to know that maybe he shouldn’t be looking any more closely. What if Jesus is in there, naked? What if *someone else* is in there? Something about the linens just lying there by themselves makes him back away, turn away, stop looking.

Simon Peter arrives next. He sees the rolled away stone, he leans in, and sees the linens lying there and then he takes their *collective sightline* a little further, he actually goes *inside* the tomb. And because he widens his field of vision, he can see more. He sees something Mary and John did not. He sees the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head rolled up by itself, not with other linens. And this signals something to him. Something is odd or off or awe-inspiring, he’s not sure. He calls his friend John to come inside, and the text says, as John walks fully into the tomb to join Peter, we read that John “*saw and believed.*”

We don’t know what he believed. Maybe that Mary was right? That Jesus’ body was

stolen? Or maybe that Jesus really did what he said he was going to do and was raised from the dead?

We don’t want he believed, but I love how, in the whole first part of this story, the *seeing* is what is emphasized. From the beginning, the seeing is *gradual*, and it is *communal*. Mary sees a little just from the outside of the tomb. And then, John peeks in from the edge of the tomb and sees a little more. And then Peter goes *all the way into* the tomb and sees the most. And once he’s in, John joins him, and it’s in *that* moment the seeing becomes believing. Note that believing doesn’t happen with just one person, it takes two!

It’s like their picture of what is happening keeps getting bigger and bigger. They are seeing more details, one by one.

This expanding vision made me think of how I’ve gotten into this bad habit of watching TV shows or movies on my iPhone. I like the convenience of watching something on my phone because I can take my phone to the mud room while I do laundry, to the kitchen while I do the dishes, to the bathroom as I get ready for bed. The show

travels with me where I go, but really, *what* I am really seeing? The screen is so tiny, and the sound coming through such a small speaker. Plus, I'm always distracted because such a small screen doesn't demand my full focus. There are details I am missing, such as the subtitles, which by the way, are critically important in a show like *The Crown*, because I can't always understand the British accent on the first go round. I don't even notice all that I'm NOT seeing on my iPhone until Damon and I have a night off together and we actually sit on the couch on watch something on our TV. Which isn't even that big, but it's at least a few feet long, hanging on a wall, instead of on just 5" in my palm. Just increasing the size of the screen increases my field of vision exponentially. I can see the creases in people's faces, the scenery in the background, the subtitles. I'm more focused, and it's more enjoyable.

But really, watching anything on a screen at home is still a limited experience. If you want to truly see everything and enjoy the show without distractions, you've got to go to the movie theatre. What with its giant screen the size of a wall, and Dolby surround sound, and

zero distractions except for the people around you chewing popcorn and sipping soda. We go to the movies because we don't want to miss anything, right? If you're like me, you don't even like to have to leave a movie to use the restroom; I want to be all settled so I can see it all. That's what I'm paying for afterall—the experience of being engrossed in this film.

This is even *more true* when it's an IMAX theatre. Those screens can be up to 10 times the size of regular movie theatres, they wrap around to the sides with Dolby Atmos sound, and often come with 3D glasses to make the experience even more engaging. IMAX theatres are designed to help you see more and hear more than you would in a regular theatre. They want you to feel like you are there, with the penguins in Antarctica, with the mountain climber on the edge of the cliff, with the scuba diver under the sea.

If the Easter story was a movie, it's like it's being viewed on these different sized screens. It's like Mary, at first when she just sees the stone rolled away and leaves, is just viewing things on her iPhone. She's just getting a cursory view of things, a glance,

her focus not staying long enough to truly see the full picture, she can't see the details.

Then as John arrives to the tomb, the screen gets bigger; he's viewing things on the TV, if you will. He sees more than just the stone rolled away, his view of the background is big enough to see the linens folded up.

Then Peter arrives, and he takes us to the movie theatre. He goes for the full, engaging experience, stepping inside the dark auditorium (I mean tomb), no distractions – and sees even more than before; he see the head cloth. He invites John inside, and it's like when John steps inside with him, they are no longer at your local AMC, they are at the IMAX downtown with wrap around views and incredible sound, they are pulled into the picture and they not only see, they *believe*. They “get it” and are in awe. You only get to *that* point of belief by stepping inside the tomb, and allowing yourself to be surrounded...to have the full experience, not even of what you are seeing as much as what you are NOT seeing. Perhaps the emptiness of the tomb had to envelope them for them to see

beyond what was there and what *wasn't* there.

But, my friends, the story does not stop there. And neither does the scope of vision.

A few years ago an even newer technology came out that eclipses even the IMAX experience. Virtual Reality. A few weeks ago, Damon took me on a surprise date to *Space Explorers: The Infinite, The World's Most Captivating Immersive Space Experience*. Inspired by Nasa Missions to the International Space Station, *Space Explorers* is an awesome and awe-inspiring Virtual Reality experience. You put on a full headset with wrap around vision goggles and speakers that go directly into your ears. You walk around as if you are on the international space station, touching orbs and interacting with objects that respond to your movement. You can see the stars and earth and moon rotating around you. Somehow you know you are just in a big room walking around with a headset on with a bunch of other funny looking people, but when you have the headset on, it really feels like you are there. Like you are in outer space. The planet is rotating around you. The astronauts are floating in

zero gravity and talking around you, doing their daily tasks. You have 360 degree, “above/below/to your right/to your left/in front of you/behind you” breathtaking views of Earth. It is a way of seeing that is unlike any other. It’s embodied.

Mary has no idea that while Peter and John had the IMAX experience version of Easter morning, she was about to have the latest breaking technology, fully immersive, Virtual Reality experience...she was going to interact with the Risen Lord herself!

Mary is standing outside of the tomb weeping. She sees some angels, and even in seeing those angels through her tears, she is still *not seeing* the Good News. All she sees is emptiness. She sees what is *not* there. Mary was looking for something and because she hasn’t found what she’s looking for, she thinks there is nothing to see. Her gaze is cast down.

But these angels say to her, “*Woman why are you weeping?*” Mary’s answer reveals her despair. She is desperate to know where she can go to see her Lord’s body.

But then, it’s as if the angels snap a VR headset on her because all of the sudden, she sees a gardener, and of course, she does not recognize him. It’s only when she expresses her grief and desperation to him, and he says her name, “*Mary,*” that she immediately knows she is standing in the presence of the Risen Lord. In her grief and fear and concern, Mary’s vision had been cast down and now her Vision is Risen. Her eyes are opened. Her screen has just expanded and wrapped around in ways that allow her to see something she could not see before. She is out in the light of morning, the rising sun, in the garden, not in the dark, empty tomb – and it’s there in the light of the early day – in the place she never expected to see him, that Mary sees Jesus: “*I have seen the Lord!*”

There, in the garden, Mary’s Vision is Risen. Her hope is restored.

She sees what she thought she would never see again. Her cast down eyes are lifted up.

What about you?

Is your gaze cast down by grief? Are your eyes rolling with skepticism, doubting things will

ever change in our world? Are your eyelids heavy and drooping with the weight of the world? Have you lost your focus in the frenzy of too much activity? Are your eyes glazed over with numbness because it's just all so overwhelming? Has your vision gotten smaller and smaller as your life has gotten harder and harder? Are you viewing the world through a screen the size of an iPhone or are you engaged in the fully immersive experience of virtual reality, that is actually not virtual at all – but real and alive – right before you?

In the words of a brilliant theologian, **“sometimes we are so focused on what we want to see, that we completely miss what we’re being shown.”**

That brilliant theologian is Damon Scalfaro by the way.

Sometimes we are so focused on what *we* want to see, on what *we’re* looking for, that we completely miss what God is trying to show us.

I wonder what it might mean for us to see our lives with Easter eyes? To notice that our vision becomes clearer when we help each other see. When we join each other on the journey, to

lengthen our sightline, to widen the field of vision, to step warily into what feels like an emptiness or darkness only to discover the entryway to a whole new way of seeing and believing...and *living*. Which is what Easter is about after all. A reminder that Death does not have the last word. Life does. Hope does. Love does.

While we are busy looking for what we want to see happen in the world, I wonder, what is God trying to show us?

While we are occupied with our eyes cast down in grief and sorrow, I wonder, where is the Risen Christ trying to catch our eye and lift our gaze?

We have accepted so many things as ‘normal’ in our world. And we’ve just let our eyes fall with it all. We accept violence and wars and injustices. We accept over-tired-ness and over-workedness. We accept genocide and racism and anti-Semitism and sexism. We accept religious and political persecution and gun violence and mass shootings. We accept homelessness and poverty and illness and death and depression and xenophobia and islamophobia and homophobia and transphobia—I wonder,

what is the Risen Christ trying to make visible to us today? What are we not seeing because of our cast down vision? What are we missing because we are looking so hard for the thing “we think” we need to see or that God “should be” showing us?

There is so much in the world that clouds our vision. At first, Mary, John, and Peter DON’T see what they are looking for and they almost miss what God is trying to show them. Mary is the first to fully see. Her vision is the first to be raised up by the sound of her Lord’s voice, and by his very presence in her midst.

And yet the Easter story continues beyond the morning, doesn’t it? This is not just an experience for Mary, it is for *all of us*.

Because you see, that night, the disciples are fearful and afraid, huddled together in the same room where they shared their last meaningful memory with Jesus together – with the door locked.

And then, Jesus himself shows up. Stands among them. Beside them. Says, “*Peace be with you.*” He shows them his hands

and his side, that is, he shows him his wounds, still fresh and not yet scarred over, he shows them his full self – having suffered and died yet having risen and now living (again). And the text says that the disciples rejoiced when they _____, when they what? When they *saw* the Lord.

They see Jesus. Their eyes are opened—not by a display of power, but one of vulnerability, humanness. Their vision is raised. They rejoice. They, too, have seen the Lord.

But you see, seeing the Risen Lord is not where the story ends either, is it?

Jesus says to them a second time, “*Peace be with you,*” and then adds, “*As the Father has sent me, so I **send** you.*”

Jesus breathes on them; that is, he literally gives him his precious breath, the very breath the world had snuffed out of him as he was dying on the cross. Jesus, in this moment, breathes his very life, his Risen Life, into them and says, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*”

It’s not even Pentecost, y’all!? Pentecost is 50 days away, and yet here we are – on Easter, with

the very breath of the Risen Lord in our lungs, in our lives, calling us out of our fearful huddles in locked rooms and into the difficulty of our world with a Risen Vision!

Because, you see, Mary seeing the Lord and the disciples seeing the Lord, that is one thing...their personal testimony. But what allows *us* to proclaim that “Christ is Risen” today is the fact that they did not keep what they saw to themselves. This was not just a vision for them, it was a vision for the world. A vision to seen, and then, shared.

“Lift up your eyes to the hills, to the Maker of Heaven and Earth,” says the Psalmist. “Lift up your weeping eyes, Mary; look at me,” says the gardener. “Lift up your fear-filled eyes, huddled disciples. See my wounds,” says the Risen Christ. Raise your vision above the news headlines and above the power plays of politics. Raise your vision above what you are scrolling through online. Raise your vision above your own self-doubts and worries and see...and believe...that this is not just a vision for you to see, this is a vision for you to cast to the world: the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. A

vision that Jesus spent his entire ministry sharing with us.

I wonder how many Easter mornings we’ve read this text as if we’re watching something on our iPhone, when God is inviting us to see something bigger. And I’m not just talking about TV screen bigger, or movie screen bigger, or IMAX 3D theatre bigger, or even VR headset bigger, I’m talking about a vision that displays in full color, surround sound, all-immersive interactive ways that God IS Love, and Love is the Way, the *only* way to make our world well. To rise above this hell-on-earth we’ve accepted as reality and say, “No, Look, See, there IS another way!”

Our Easter invitation is to open our eyes and look up and out and around. To truly see, not what we’re looking for, but what we’re being shown. Like Mary, we may not recognize it at first. That’s okay. Like John and Peter, we may need others to help us lean in and go a step further until we see. That’s okay. Easter morning may start with Mary by herself, but it quickly moves to being a community event. There’s no shame in needing some help with our vision. Our vision will always need correcting,

refining. That's okay. What's most important is that we keep our eyes open, our gaze up.

Because the Easter story is full of visions of the Risen Christ. And they call us to raise our vision, too. To live with A Risen Vision of what the world can be. Of a world made well. Of a world restored and renewed, where justice reigns and peace prevails and healing comes and love thrives.

The crucifixions of our Good Fridays would have us believe that Death and Power and Suffering and Violence and Fear are the only things worth seeing. The silence of Holy Saturday would have us believe that Doubt and Grief and Hopelessness and Loss and Heartache will cloud our vision forever.

But on Easter morning, we raise our vision with the vision of the risen Lord. We open our eyes, albeit slowly and gradually, but we open our eyes and we see. Anew. Afresh. We lift our vision, raise our hopes, look up and out and around to one another say, and say, not just Christ is Risen, but *Together We Will Rise*. And our world will too.

May what we see with Easter eyes today reveal a Risen Vision for tomorrow. Not ignoring what we see in the world around us, but believing that there is more that God is trying to show us.

Amen.