

Easter is Personal!

John 20:1-18
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Bethany Church
Wesley J. Gabel

What a year in cinema! Last May we learned that we did not see what we thought, John leaning on Jesus, in Leonardo De Vinci's famous painting of the Last Supper. According to a movie, this 15th Century painter somehow obtained secret knowledge that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and it was a masculine Mary rather than a feminine John he painted. Now, a "documentary" film has uncovered Jesus' grave including the bones of his parents, wife and children. If only they had found this 1900 years earlier, no disciple would have been martyred, and Rabbi Saul could have been spared from his conversion and vilification by peers. He wrote:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Corinthians 15:14-15, 17-19, NIV)

World-renown archeologist, Sir William Ramsay called Luke, the writer of both the gospel and Acts, a historian of first rank. Luke records this of Paul's speech in Athens:

"(God) commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." (Acts 17:30-33, NIV)

We know that the religious Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection and obviously neither did some people from Athens, religious or not. We cannot claim that Easter was a religious metaphor. It was *the observable signal to Jesus' identity*. In fact Paul writes:

I want to remind you of the gospel I preached... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also. (1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-8, NIV)

According to this converted Rabbi, the most important element of the good news is that the Messiah died for our sins in accord with written prophecy, was buried and again, in accord with written prophecy, rose from the dead on the third day (not immediately like a resuscitation) and that he appeared to people who were still alive and could validate Paul's witness. He also appeared to Paul in a different and personal way.

If you have any skepticism about the resurrection, I challenge you to investigate it yourself. Try and find any specific historical event that at this moment has no contemporary witnesses, and is as thoroughly tested and widely substantiated as the resurrection.

Understand that the message of the gospels is not about law, principles or philosophy. It is about what people have witnessed happening in your world and mine and its implications. It is news about what people have heard from God, what they have seen from God and what they've experienced. The witnesses of the resurrection testified to it with their mouth and their blood. Many witnesses of the risen and exalted Christ like Paul, who experienced a power encounter with Christ, speak today. Some of you here testify that Jesus met you in repentance and transformed your life. I can say that the risen Lord poured his Spirit on me transforming my heart and life, and that he has met with me in both moments of devotion and crisis. By virtue of his spiritual work, I'm a witness of the risen and exalted Lord, and today you have the choice to either accept my testimony as valid, or to reject it as open lie or self-deception. I also must tell

you that much of my daily walk is by faith and not sight, by trust and promise, not by visible hand. Isn't that what we observe in the Bible?

When the Apostle John wrote about the resurrection, he stressed its personal and transforming nature. We know from Luke that at least five women from Galilee told the eleven apostles' about the empty tomb, yet John focuses on one of them: Mary Magdalene. He shares her story with us. Jesus had liberated Mary from the haunt of many spirits. In her freedom, she followed Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. Although she was grateful and devoted, she was also confused and despondent because of his death. When she saw the empty tomb, she was not convinced of his resurrection. She thought that the followers of Jesus just suffered another indignity. When she found Peter and John, she reported that someone took Jesus' body and the women can't find him. Peter and John ran to the sight, found the empty grave clothes and began to believe. They left with faith in their hearts, but not Mary. She lingered at the site, weeping in despair. She looked in the tomb again and this time, through the blur of tears she saw angels, messengers of God, sitting there. They spoke to Mary, but she dismissed them as men. Perhaps, the other women had seen, heard and recognized an angel when they first visited the tomb. Perhaps, they were searching for the other nine disciples as Mary wept at the tomb. She turned away from the angels to see a man she thought was the gardener. His voice gave her no comfort until he called out her name:

“Mary!” Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, “Rabboni!” (which is Hebrew for “Teacher”). “Don't cling to me,” Jesus said, “for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:16-17, NLT)

Mary must have hung on to Jesus like a scared child. I remember one day dropping my child at a babysitter; I had to literally peel the little one off me: one hand, the other hand, one leg,

then the other. My heart broke, but it was to my child's benefit that I do this. The child's welfare depended on what I would do next. That was Jesus' message for Mary. "Don't hang onto this moment or to me the way I am now. We got great things to do. Go find my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." We're family, and we have family business.

Easter became personal like that for Peter as the risen Jesus addressed his guilt for abandoning him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It became personal for Thomas who couldn't fathom the resurrection. It became personal for two despondent disciples who in confusion walked that Easter day to the village of Emmaus. It became personal for Rabbi Saul when much later in the name of God he tried to crush the rumor of the resurrection and heard from Christ himself.

Has Easter become personal to you? Have you heard Jesus call your name? Has he dealt with your guilt and sin? Has he cleared your confusion and stopped your tears? Or are you stuck in the past? Are you crippled with doubts and fears? Do you act as if he is still dead?

This morning Jesus sent me to you. Through my mouth and in your spirit he is appealing to you. He is calling your name. Do you sense that? Your attitudes and actions are often impure and that poison brings death, yet he has come to you with grace to forgive and power to purify. Will you welcome and trust him?

For some of you this is a new day, you are moving from believer to witness that is because the Spirit of Jesus is working in you to remove your guilt and claim you. For others, you've already tasted, but you're stuck, clinging to the past. You need to trust his presence today and his work among us so that you can move on. Ask forgiveness and declare your faith in him and his work today. Great things will unfold.