

The Greatest Miracle Never Seen John 20:1-18

For a story that we *think we know so well*, there is a lot we *don't know* about Easter. What we believe about the resurrection of our Lord ultimately comes down to a matter of faith. There is no dossier of *facts* that would stand up to scientific scrutiny or legal standards of evidentiary procedure. Easter is literally, the "Greatest Miracle Never Seen." After all, there was not a single eyewitness to the blessed event itself; there is only a collection of testimonials from some of Jesus' closest associates concerning an empty tomb, and reports of encounters with the Risen Christ. Yet, even those who claim to have seen Jesus alive in the days after discovering his tomb to be uninhabited, are not ashamed to confess that they did not recognize him at first sight.

After finding Jesus' body to be missing, Mary Magdalen stood outside the tomb weeping, when she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but *she did not know that it was Jesus.*" She mistook him for the gardener, and asked him if he knew where the body of Jesus has been taken. It is only when Jesus speaks her name—"Mary"—that her vision clears and she knows it is him.

That evening, the resurrected Jesus shows up at the place where his disciples are staying. But he they don't believe it's him until he proves it by rolling up his sleeves and lifting the hem of his robe, showing them the wounds to his hands and his side from the crucifixion. Only then do they "see" him for who he is.

Two of Jesus' followers were journeying on the road to Emmaus when they were joined by a stranger. The fellow traveler is the Risen Jesus, but their eyes are kept from recognizing that it is him. Until they stop for the night to rest and eat. When the mysterious fellow traveler breaks the bread at the table to share it with them, *their eyes are suddenly opened* to know it is actually Jesus.

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to detect a pattern here. No matter how well any of his followers knew Jesus on sight *before* his death, there is something different about his appearance *after* he is raised from death. Something that prevents anyone from recognizing him.

What finally allowed them to know it was him was not the familiarity of his physical appearance, but the power of his actions. It is in the intimate speaking of

a name, in the vulnerability of revealing his scars, and in the breaking and sharing of bread that Jesus' identity becomes real to them. Even though resurrection altered Jesus' outward appearance, he was still identifiable by his deeds.

I believe there is a lesson in all this for the Church. Over and over again, the New Testament refers to the Church as "The Body of Christ." But for over a year now, the restrictions placed on social gatherings have made it feel like this corporate Body of Christ has been asleep in a tomb.

Last Spring, when Easter services were cancelled, I remember saying that whenever the time came for it to be deemed safe for congregations to regather—regardless of what the calendar said—that would truly be an Easter experience. A resurrection reality. We are still in a place of eagerly awaiting the stone that has held us captive to be rolled away, and the re-emergence of the Body of Christ that the Church represents to happen. But just as the resurrected body of Jesus did not look exactly like the body that was laid in the tomb, it might be a mistaken expectation that this resurrected Body of Christ will, or even should, be an exact likeness of the pre-pandemic Church.

There is a difference between a resuscitated body and a resurrected body. A resurrected body is a body that has unquestionably died and been reborn as immortal. Only God has the power to resurrect a body. A resurrected body is a new creation, equipped for life eternal. A resuscitated body is a body that was temporarily lifeless, but then was revived. Anyone who knows CPR has the power to potentially resuscitate a body. But a resuscitated life is equipped only to resume living the familiar life it had before, until that life eventually ends once and for all.

On that morning when the resurrected Jesus revealed himself to Mary outside of the empty tomb, she called him, "Rabbouni", or Rabbi. That was the familiar role and title by which his disciples knew him. Jesus said to her, "Do not hold onto me..." and he spoke of his needing to return to his God and their God. Jesus didn't want her and his other disciples to misinterpret his resurrection simply as a picking up from where they left off when last together. His being raised was meant to be more than a return to what had been; to being their Rabbi and teacher. It was time for them to let go of what was and embrace a new reality in their relationship.

Could Jesus be speaking the same message to his Church today, as the light of a post-pandemic resurrection morning is dawning on the horizon. Might Jesus be inviting us to let go of the impulse for returning to some things that were familiar and comfortable? Encouraging us not to settle for merely being an institutional body resuscitated, when God offers us the opportunity to be the Body of Christ resurrected? I hope that we, as the Body of Christ, will not ignore the lessons the pandemic has taught us. I pray that we will not stand weeping over the time that was taken from us this past year; but that, like Mary, we will hear the voice of Jesus calling our name where we least expected to find him.

Having had our eyes opened to receive a glimpse of what the Body of Christ on earth can be and do in unprecedented circumstances, such as maintaining a worshiping presence that reaches beyond the walls of our sanctuary. May we aspire to do more than return to what was comfortable; but to hold in its place, a vision of how to be the Church in ways the Spirit is calling us, that we had never imagined before.

The resurrection of Jesus' physical body may have been "the greatest miracle never seen." But, hopefully through the post-pandemic resurrection of the Body of Christ that is the Church—more people will "see" Jesus like they have never beheld him before

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