

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
9 April 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Easter Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Seeing is Believing”

First Sermon in the Series, *Compassion & Commission* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 28:1-10

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.

Well, thank you David, choir, handbells, and timpani! Matthew’s Gospel already gives us “the most dramatic Easter story ever” – and you truly made the text come alive with texture, sound, and celebration.

Compared to the other three gospel accounts of Easter morning, Matthew is, hands down, the show-stopper.

Mark’s gospel is like a mystery novel full of suspense; he has the women approaching the tomb in whispers of worry (“*who will roll away the stone for us?*”) and then fleeing in fear and silence – not telling a soul about what they found, or didn’t. (*Mark 16:1-8*)

Luke’s version is quite dry actually. I call it the “nerdy professor / mansplaining version” of Easter morning. The women enter the tomb with spices to anoint the body but are bewildered at its emptiness. Before they can get a word out,

two men pop up and ask, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee that The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of the sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again?*” He drones on and on quoting scripture (taking all the mystery and wonder out of this moment) until the women are like, “*Yes, Yes! Enough already, we remember, we remember!*” as they leave to tell the others what they had “supposedly” forgot. (*Luke 24:1-10*)

And of course, then there’s John’s account, which is perhaps the most beloved of them all. John tells the story in two Acts. Act I is full of chaos and action (kind of like today’s service with all the kids all around). There’s a lot of running two and fro – the women discover an empty tomb, and run and tell the men, and then they race to the tomb, one

outruns the other and gets their first but he doesn't want to go in, then the other catches up and he does go in. And then he gets the other guy to go in.

Meanwhile in the midst of all that back and forth and running to and fro we see Mary, weeping. Which transitions us to the tenderness of Act II.

Angels ask Mary why she's being so emotional – and she says – *“Why am I being so emotional?! Somebody robbed the tomb! Jesus is gone!”* Then like the happy ending of every Hallmark movie, a gardener appears, a gardener who is actually Jesus, of course, and he and Mary have this beautiful moment of embrace and blessing and Mary believes and runs off with excitement. (*John 20:1-18*)

Each Gospel account reveals a beauty and truth of the Resurrection that is unique.

But – lucky for us – we get Matthew's version this Easter – which is what I like to call full on summer blockbuster Marvel Universe Action Film. The story starts the same as all the others, the women approaching the tomb in the wee hours of the morning, air thick with grief, fatigue in their footsteps. But then bam! We've got a dramatic

earthquake caused by an Angel of the Lord descending from heaven at the speed of light looking like lightening (Captain Marvel style perhaps?

Energy/light flowing out of its body). But then this Captain Marvel-esque Angel proceeds to morph into the Hulk, with strength enough to roll back the huge stone in front of the tomb. And then in a final flip, becomes like Spiderman, nimbly hopping up and popping a squat on top of the stone. All of this happening in one huge action-packed instant – as if to say, *“Sorry Rome. You tried, and you failed. You can crucify a man, but you cannot kill God.”* (dunh dunh dunh) I mean you can just see the whole thing playing out on the big screen, right?

Matthew is no stranger to dramatic effect. He has put us through the ringer during Lent, has he not? And here he is, interrupting the quietness of Easter morning with an earthquake. Once again, Matthew uses an earthquake to show us that God is shaking things up. There was a “shaking” on Palm Sunday as Jesus entered the city in “turmoil”, turning tables and turning the ways of the world upside down; there was a

“shaking” when Jesus cried out on the cross, breathing his last, the Temple curtain tearing in two and rocks splitting and graves opening...and here again today the earth trembles symbolizing that God is breaking down all that is wrong with the world so that something new can rise up out of the rubble.

Matthew wants us to SEE the power of God, without a doubt, and BELIEVE in the Resurrection. And we desperately want to see the power of God and believe in the Good News of the Resurrection too.

With tornados tearing across our country, gun shots firing in our schools and malls, our former president being indicted for alleged criminal conduct, three House Representatives being expelled in Tennessee, a Texas Judge issuing an order prohibiting women from accessing medication, and bombs dropping in Ukraine tearing apart cities and families and livelihoods – not to mention whatever grief, anxiety, stress, or disruption that is happening in your own life right now – we are a people who know what it means for our souls to feel shattered, the earth to be

shaking, for even the very foundation of our faith to be quaking.

So the cosmic impact of Matthew’s Easter story resonates, with us, in these times, does it not? It’s as if God knows that only a complete shaking and ground-breaking can awaken us to the Risen Christ...to the Good News that when all we see is Devastating Rubble, God still shows us Divine Rising.

If you are a person who believes in signs and for whom, “seeing” is indeed “believing” – then let this Easter Story be your sign of all signs. Make no mistake, Jesus is not locked up dead in some tomb, Christ is alive and at loose in the world. And if we had any doubt the super-hero angel propped up on the rolled away stone is sign all we need that God has the last word, not the world.

Matthew gives us the grand signs to see God’s power and presence, but there is also a more personal and more subtle “seeing” that this text reveals to us too. A seeing that comes through not what is obvious, but what is obscured. A seeing that comes perhaps only after we stop looking for what we

THINK we NEED to see or are SUPPOSED to see.

Because you see Matthew's gospel is unique in that the women actually get to see the stone rolled away and tomb opened. And yet even in getting to see the tomb broken open, the women are still disappointed; afraid. They still don't get to see what (or who) they came to see. *"They still haven't found what they're looking for,"* (thank you U2).

There is something deeply profound for the testimony of our faith about *this* moment. Easter doesn't get more exciting than Matthew's version of the Resurrection. And yet, in the end, *even* with getting to SEE the tomb opened right before their eyes, the women are still left without getting to see Jesus physically rise from the dead. Stone or no stone...still sealed up or already open...guards dead or alive...Jesus is not there. In each account of Easter morning, the women come to the tomb to see what they think will be Jesus, and they leave having seen nothing but emptiness.

Do you ever feel this way? That you go exactly to where you think Jesus is supposed to be –

and he's not there? That you look exactly where the church has told you to go to look for Jesus – and he is not there? That you pray all the prayers, sing all the hymns, go to all the services, serve all the people, do all the things you are supposed to do – and yet, it still feels like faith is empty or Jesus is absent? Just missing?

I know this feeling too, and I know that it can feel like Emptiness is Absence. That it can feel like we have failed when we don't find Jesus or God where we want to find them, when we don't feel or experience the Divine as we really try to hard to experience them. And that emptiness can feel like God has forsaken us, or even perhaps, our world.

But friends, Easter reminds us that Emptiness is not actually Absence. Emptiness may just be Presence. What if the Risen Christ is not where WE expect to find him or so desperately WANT to see him or even where we've been told or taught to see him and find him? What if what we try so hard to "see" is actually not what God is trying to show us?

For you see, it's only when the women turn their back on the

tomb, on the place they had thought they would find Jesus, and start making their way down the unknown road ahead, that they, in fact, are greeted by the presence of the Risen Christ himself.

And the Greek backs up this idea that we may not be seeing what we need to see. Or that there may be something more for us to see. Because in the text today there are three different words for the word “see.”

In verse one, the women go to “see” the tomb. *This* word for “see” in Greek is *theoreo*. It means to view attentively, to observe, to decipher, to make sense of what one sees with their physical eyes. The women go to the tomb because they want to literally see Jesus, the body of Jesus, which is what they expect to see. In many ways, like the women, we too go to the tomb to “see” Jesus with our own eyes...the Risen Jesus...so that we can have “proof” that our faith is real, this story is true.

But the next time the word “see” is used comes in verse 5. And here, this kind of “seeing” is not about the kind of face-value “seeing” or “observing” that the word *theoreo* means. No, in

verse 5, the angel invites the women to “come and see” inside the tomb...not to see Jesus himself as proof, but to see where he had laid. The word for “see” in this verse, verse 5 is *horao*. It means not to see with the eyes, but rather to “see with the mind,” to “perceive and know with the heart,” “to experience with ones’s full self.” *Horao* is a spiritual kind of seeing, a “knowing” that is about more than just what visual cues tell you.

I love this. Because it feels like this invitation is for all of us. So often we come to faith wanting to see with that first kind of sight (*theoreo*) evidence and proof of what we believe...to know for a fact that God is there, that what the Bible says is true, that everything we believe is real and happened just as we think it did.

And to that earnest desire to “see” and to find “proof/evidence” for our faith, God gives us invitation to try a different type of seeing. To see with our hearts, our own experience, as in *horao*, to worry less about proof of God, and trust more deeply in the promises of God. That perhaps physically seeing the Empty Tomb is not about finding an

Empty Faith and being let down, but about “spiritually discovering” the Risen Christ in ways beyond explaining and letting that presence lead us forward.

And this is exactly what happens. The angel tells the women they will “see” Jesus, he is up ahead in Galilee. And, just one more Greek lesson, I promise. The word for “see” in this verse, verse 6, is *optanomai*, which means to appear, or to allow oneself to be seen, to reveal or show oneself. This kind of seeing is all about what the object/person you are looking at shows you or reveals to you, it’s not about what you try to see or want to see at all. It is about what the object of your seeing reveals to you. In other words, it’s far less about what YOU control, and is rather about what comes TO you.

And sure enough, that is the same word Jesus uses of himself in verse 10 at the end of the passage when Jesus says, *“Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers and sisters in Galilee; there they will ‘see’ me too.”* As in, I will reveal myself to them, show myself to them too.

Friends, as much as many of us would like hard evidence, proof

of our faith, that God exists without a shadow of the doubt, the truth is, we cannot force ourselves to “see” the proof that we want for whatever questions of faith we have. But what we can do is accept the invitation of the angel, to see with a different kind of vision – a spiritual kind of seeing – that says, *“you know what? I may not see what I came to see or what I want to see...the body of Jesus in this empty tomb...but where else is God leading me to look? What else is God showing me that I haven’t been able to see because my vision has been fixed to the familiar? Where do I see God when I stop looking for God in all the usual places? What tombs am I staring at that I need to turn away from in order to turn towards the living God, the Risen Christ?”*

Sometimes Easter Hope can feel hidden. But maybe, just maybe...it’s just around the next corner, the next challenge, the next disappointment, the next tomb. If we just keep going...if we keep answering the invitation to “come and see”...if we help *each other out* along the way.

Yesterday at the Easter Egg hunt for the kids here at Calvary, I caught a beautiful

moment that illustrates what it means to see the world through Easter Eyes. Follow this metaphor with me, will you? That life is like a playground, and the presence of God is scattered around like Easter Eggs in the gravel. Imagine the eggs as truths about our faith scattered all around. Some are more out in the open, some are more hidden. Sometimes someone else sees something we don't see at first or vice versa...but the easter eggs out there represent all the signs of God that are indeed out in the world for us to find and see – evidence of our belief that we can collect in the basket of our faith – and sometimes we're surprised by what we find, and often it's not about what we grab ourselves but about what we're given by another.

So yesterday. All the kids were out on the gravel-ly playground with their baskets – eagerly searching for Easter Eggs. Three-year-old Julian Fletcher reached down to pick up an Easter egg, and as he was bent down, and reaching to grasp it, he was just low enough to the ground to catch a different angle and see another egg that had been hidden to him before that moment when he was crouched low. It was under a bench. His

eyes popped wide open. First egg still gripped in hand, he popped up to run over and grab the second egg. And just as he bent over to get it, it was gone. He just saw some white sneakers where the egg had been. His face fell for a slight moment as he looked up – seeing eight-year-old Aubrey Gangloff with egg in her hand. She got to it before he did.

Ugh. If you are three years old, at an Easter Egg hunt, this is pretty much the worse scenario ever right? It's like the kid equivalent of the adult scenario of some car pulling right in front of your car – getting that parking spot you had your eye on (and your blinker on reserving!) – but they snatch it before you can. Sigh.

Julian, though his face fell a bit, just stood there diplomatically staring – eyes wide and slightly crestfallen, head cocked to the side – and I kid you not, within a millisecond, without missing a beat – Aubrey was handing the egg to Julian with a huge smile on her face saying “*Yeah!! We found it!*” As if to say, “*Julian, I saw you see this egg; and I was just bending down to pick it up for you...it's your egg for your basket! Isn't it fun to find eggs together!*”

Julian's eyes lit back up again. He smiled, she smiled. All were happy. All was well.

Five years his senior, Aubrey was astute enough to know that for Julian...getting the Easter Egg that he had spotted would mean more to him than her keeping one more Egg for herself – since her basket was overflowing. As one of the “older kids” not only could Aubrey spot Easter Eggs faster, she could also get to them more quickly. I found out later that she had actually given her basket to her mom and said, *“I have enough eggs, I'm going to go help the little kids find eggs now.”*

Don't you just love practical theologians? Especially 3-year-old and 8-year-old ones?

Think about it.

Three-year-old Julian's younger eyes still lit up every time he saw an egg. He had fewer eggs in his basket and fewer egg hunts in his life experience. Also, with a tinier body, it was more effort for him to get to the eggs and pick them up and spot the next one. And so each egg meant a lot to him. Easter Egg Hunts take a lot of work when

you are little – mental and physical.

Eight-year-old Aubrey's older/wiser eyes were more accustomed to seeing eggs, she could grasp them easier, and she was well practiced in the art of the Easter Egg hunt...what with 8 years of experience under her belt. She had a full basket of eggs, before most kids had a few. So knowing her basket was full – she went off to help others who baskets were less full. Who were struggling just a bit more to see and find the same eggs she saw so clearly and easily.

As they ran off from this brief exchange, I stood staring at the ground for a while, looking at the gravel all over the playground, spotted with Easter Eggs that all the kids were eagerly chasing after and I thought to myself...Why isn't our Faith Journey as Joyous and Full of Discovery as this Easter Egg Hunt?

I turn on the news, and all I see is the mundane grey gravel of bad stuff. Story after story of pain and loss and heartache and violence. And sure – there is a whole heck of a lot of gravel out there on the playground of our life. But all around that gravel – there are brightly colored Easter

Eggs full of sweet surprises inside. Have I become so accustomed to seeing the gravel, that I've stopped even looking for the eggs? Or even worse, do I see the egg, and just walk past it, cynically saying – well – that's just one egg...I'm sure whatever is in it is nice...but how can one piece of chocolate sweeten the bitterness of all the bad stuff of life?

Julian and Aubrey inspired me yesterday to have Easter Eyes...just like the women on Easter morning. They put aside what they were expecting to see and instead answered the invitation to see differently...or at the very least, to look in a new place for Jesus.

What does it mean to let the unexpected empty tomb...to let the surprise of the Resurrection...refract our vision? What does it mean to focus less on what WE want or need or expect to see, and instead open our eyes to what God is showing us and revealing to us?

The women who came to the tomb could have just as easily walked away back home, distraught that they didn't find what they were looking for, feeling like they missed out, on

the THE defining moment of their faith.

But the Good News hidden within the Good News. The sweet surprise inside of that already brightly colored egg in the gravel of life.

You can't miss out on seeing Jesus. You just can't.

There is this beautiful moment in the story, when the tomb is opened, and the angel sees that the women's faces have fallen and they are full of fear. They see that Jesus isn't here and they worry they have missed him. They came here for one last goodbye and they missed their chance. If they had only believed Jesus' words about the resurrection, they would have come a day earlier to anoint his body and not waited until the third day...what were they thinking?

But the angel says, *“Do not fear! You haven't missed out. You may have missed him in this moment, but he's just up ahead. Go down that way, and trust me, you won't be able to miss him. He's gonna show up; he's gonna greet you. You haven't missed your chance.”*

And of course, the women discover that they hadn't missed out on Jesus at all. He surprises them when they least expect it and greets them with joy – and with a *job*. To go and tell others that they will get to “see” him too. They are met with compassion, and sent out with a commission.

The full joy of Easter is experienced when we not only see Jesus, but we help others see him too.

Many of us come to the tomb of all that hurts in our lives on Easter Morning wanting to know, understand, make sense intellectually of the Resurrection...we want to see Jesus work some tangible miracle in our life. We want to find that lucky egg. We don't want to miss out on the hope, peace, joy, that others seem to be feeling.

But what if God comes ready to reveal and to show us something completely different on Easter Morning beyond what we thought we came to see? What if it's only in turning our back on where we thought we'd find God, and walking down the unknown road ahead, that Jesus becomes Present and present to

us in a way that is so uniquely personal and unexpected?

Because here's the final thing...just like Aubrey and Julian sharing in the joy of finding that Easter egg together...the women don't come to 'see' Jesus without a little help from some their friends. The angel points out the way to where Jesus is for the women. And then Jesus points the way to the women to where the disciples are. And the women point the way to the disciples to where Jesus is. Seeing becomes believing when we help each other out. When we point out and pick up the easter eggs in the gravel of life together...when we help each discover what is out there in the open for ALL of us to see.

When we trust that God might just show up at some point at some time in a random place down the road that is different than the familiar places we've been looking our whole lives...ready to embrace us...to show us something new.

Easter morning is all about defying expectations. What expectations are you holding on to about your life or your faith today that you need to let go of?

Whatever it is you think you need to SEE to believe...what if you stopped searching for that...and instead opened yourself up to see if God might be trying to show something just a little different?

When it comes to faith, it turns out, *seeing is believing*. Whether seeing spectacular signs of God's presence that are undeniable, or seeing in and through the empty spaces of our lives where we feel that God is absent...trusting that it just might be that God is somewhere up ahead, beckoning us down a road to come and see. "*Come and see,*" the angel says to the women. The empty tomb is not Absence but Presence. "*Go and see,*" Jesus says to the women. My Risen Presence is not for holding onto for yourselves, but for showing forth to others.

The Resurrection has never been about proving facts. The Resurrection has always been about the promise of our faith. That *God is with us – Emmanuel* – from the fullness of Mary's womb to the emptiness of the tomb and out beyond...God is with us. Let's go and see...and believe...together.

Amen.