

I Have Seen the Lord
John 20:1-18
April 24 2011
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We live in a secular society, where most people acknowledge Easter as a spring-time holiday, maybe with Easter baskets with bunnies and candy, or maybe just with a relaxed day at home, or out with friends for brunch. In Sonoma County, only a few of us are in church this morning.

A book that came out last year by Robert Putnam and David Campbell, called *American Grace*, talks about the advantages of religion in our society—We have more charitable giving and more volunteerism in the United States, for example, because of people's affiliation with religion. But these authors show how, you could say, there was a major earthquake in the 60s, a cultural revolution, when society as a whole questioned religious authority and the institution of the Church. Many Baby Boomers did not grow up in the Church, and even fewer of their children, the Generation X know anything about Sunday school or the Bible. Then there was a *first* aftershock to this earthquake. It was the rise of religious conservatism, particularly evangelical faith, a backlash against liberalism. Now we are living in a *second* aftershock, a revolt against this conservatism, against the religious right. But most progressive churches are not growing. Today religious leaders often speak about loss—the demise of the institutional Church and its declining membership. We find ourselves in a multi-religious country and, to a large extent, especially in Northern California, in a non-religious culture. It's a diverse and complicated society—not a "Christian" society. We live in a culture much like the one Jesus lived in, one with many non-religious people, and those who are religious have many different expressions of faith. It's a culture with economic strife and political disagreement ("A tough season for believers," Ross Douthat, Press Democrat, Dec. 21, 2010).

The question is, will believers today be able to experience the resurrection in this world again, as they did in the first century in Palestine?

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, early in the dark on that Sunday morning. And seeing that the stone had been rolled away, she feared that robbers had taken the body of Jesus. So she ran to get Peter and the other disciple, and while they looked in, she stood there weeping. When the others left, she looked in herself and saw two angels in white. And then she saw a man who spoke to her, "Mary!" And she recognized Jesus, and he told her to go tell the others that he was ascending into heaven to be with God. And Mary went and told the others, "I have seen the Lord."

It was a turning point for Mary. Not much had changed in her world—there was still oppression and poverty and insecurity about the future, but *she* had changed. In a moment, her faith rose up, and she said, "I have seen the Lord."

We have these moments of resurrection, if we recognize them. One of our people, Sherie

Mitchell, gave me permission to share her story. Sherie was away from the church quite a long time, and two years ago the office she worked in closed down. So she's been unemployed for the last two years. Her son was off the coast of Libya during the uprising there. You could say she was experiencing a lot of uncertainty. Then Sherie came back into the life of the church, with sudden eagerness and commitment. She was baptized. She started helping out and she participated in a spirituality group. Her son has now left the unsafe waters, and just this last week Sherie learned she was offered a job, the perfect job, the one she had been waiting for for two years. She said, "Everything is coming together! I feel so blessed!" Her positive energy reminds me of Mary at the tomb when Mary said, "I have seen the Lord." I'm going to make it! Life goes on and I have found a new strength. I have recognized God in my life!

Some world situations seem to be almost without hope. We might even wonder where God is. Last year on Easter we reflected on the effort of the people of Haiti to live with faith following the earthquake there. In the sweep of devastation, even in horrible times, we look for individual voices of hope that say, "I have seen the Lord," even if it's only a glimpse of God. And so, this year, our attention goes to Japan following the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster that began there on March 11.

A 60-year-old man, Hiromitsu Shinkawa, survived two days at sea by clinging to his floating rooftop. Several helicopters and ships passed by, but none of them noticed him. "I thought that was going to be the last day of my life," he said. But on March 13 a ship discovered him 10 miles off the Japanese coast. He had anticipated death, but he was rescued and given new life!

Not everyone was as lucky. On the shoreline of the Miyagi region, officials reported finding at least 2,000 bodies washed up onto the shore. Searching in the town of Ishinomaki, a coastal town northeast of Sendai, on March 14, Japanese soldiers went door to door, pulling bodies from homes that had been flattened by the earthquake and tsunami. They heard the crunching of rubble and the sloshing of mud, but then they heard a baby's cry. They made their way to a pile of debris and carefully removed fragments of wood and slate and shattered glass. And then they saw her: a 4-month-old baby girl in a pink woolen bear suit. A tidal wave had literally swept the baby from her parents' arms three days before. Afterward, her parents took refuge in their wrecked house, concluding that their little girl was dead. The soldiers managed to reunite the baby with her overjoyed parents. How the child survived drowning—or being crushed by fallen trees and houses—remains a mystery. A civil defense official told a local news crew: "Her discovery has put a new energy into the search. We will listen, look and dig with even more diligence after this" (Time.com). There was a buoyed morale. In a nation short on good news, this was a moment of resurrection!

"Were you there when they crucified my lord? Were you there?" the old hymn tune goes. And the last verse is the one that really matters, "Were you there when he rose up from the grave? Were you there?" Were you there at the tomb to say, "I have seen the Lord"? Were you there to recognize resurrection in your own life and say, "Everything's coming

together! I feel so blessed!" Were you there when the rescuers said, "We will listen, look, and dig with even more diligence after this!"? Were you there?

This is the future of the Church—individuals like you and me, *being there* in moments of hope, moments of resurrection, and sharing those moments together. This is the future of the Church, being around people for whom Easter is more than springtime and Sunday brunch. Easter is the assurance that hope never dies! Here in the church we know that there is always another way to look at the future and be able to say, "Everything's coming together! I feel so blessed!" "We will listen and look and dig with more diligence!" We will recognize signs of hope in our own lives, and we will work to bring rescue and renewal into the lives of others. "Were you there when he rose up from the grave?"

Yes!! We were there, and we will go to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!"