

**FROM MOURNERS TO MISSIONARIES—THE POWER OF LIFE**  
**JOHN 1:1-5, 10-14; 20:1-18**  
**EASTER, APRIL 16, 2006**  
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If the message from the angels in Matthew, Mark and Luke today is “Christ is risen!” Jesus in John’s Gospel says to Mary, “not so fast, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.”

Before we let go of the balloons and streamers and proclaim victory over death, there is one very important reunion that must take place in heaven. God and Jesus.

Rebecca read how when God created the world God foresaw sending his son to rescue his creation, you and me—a task it turns out as dangerous as driving Humvees in Baghdad. Sometimes we are so eager to strike up the band on Easter we forget the mission Jesus was on and whom he served.

The language Jesus uses for the one he serves is “my Father.” Not higher power or creative energy or other names that depict God for God is bigger than we can imagine. But for Jesus it was Abba, a first century term of endearment best translated, “Daddy.”

One of the hardest things for me as a father is to let go of our sons. To let them make their way in the world without interfering or imposing my will and advice. Most difficult of all is when they are in some trouble or jam. Letting go then is almost more than I can do. I want to rush in and start fixing things.

Which is exactly what I expect God struggled with when he let go of Jesus. When Jesus came into the world and ran up against resistance from the authorities and bullies of his day, when he was framed in a kangaroo court by backwater politicians and self-inflated religious leaders if I were God I’d have had my finger on a few lightening bolts and earthquakes.

So Jesus gets to go home today. Jesus gets to hear those words reserved for you and me but spoken first to him, “well done my good and faithful son.”

But it’s not just a self-contained family reunion. The reason Jesus is returning to God is to get things ready for you and me and to welcome us as members of the family. Children of God is how the Gospel puts it today.

Years ago I went home with a friend for spring break. He was as laid back a person as I knew. Blue jeans and flannel shirts...driving a rusty old Subaru. When we got to his home in Virginia, I was totally unprepared for his family estate, for the deference everyone gave to him, firstborn son and then to me along with a genuine welcome. Why? Because I was his friend.

It would never have occurred to me to visit my friend’s family without him. I didn’t know where they lived. The elegance of their life style was intimidating. But not with him. He was as down to earth in their mansion as he was in the hallways of the dorm.

So Jesus goes home today to prepare the way for you and me. To get heaven ready for our welcome and the welcome of our loved ones who’ve gone before us.

As someone put it, “before Easter can be about ‘us’ it has to be about ‘them.’  
About God and Jesus.

And, yes, we are here to celebrate today. We’ve heard the brass, the soaring choir, the resonant organ; we see the lilies; we find ourselves sitting expectantly among friends and strangers. Why? Because we are waiting for the best news the world has ever heard: Christ is risen and death has been defeated.

But some of us may not feel so merry this morning. Some of us may be lugging around heavy burdens or gnawing worries. Truth be told, some of us may be more taken with death this morning than life.

So how do we get there? How do we get to the glad music and shouts of joy? How do we feel the deep peace that only Christ can give when the world around us is in turmoil?

The Gospel this morning is clear: an encounter with the living Christ. Someone said the job of a good Jew is to know Torah and the job of a faithful Christian is to know Christ.

And this is exactly what happens in today’s story from the Gospel of John. Mary Magdalene, who knew Jesus so well, meets him again, as if for the first time, though she mistakes him at first for the gardener outside the empty tomb.

My hunch is most of us are here today if not to have such an encounter with the living Christ, then to get some word, to hear some song, to catch even a glimpse of someone who has. Even a shred of testimony or evidence that he is loose in the world and death defeated would be enough. I’ve never been to Times Square on New Year’s but like most of you I turn on the TV to watch the ball drop and confetti fly. For me, that makes it real. That makes it a new year. We’re here today if not to come face to face like Mary with the Risen Christ then to see some evidence that others have.

We find such evidence if we look first at John’s account of Resurrection and then at our own lives. John’s story of Resurrection is like the breaking of day from the darkness of Mary’s fear and confusion; to the dawn of the disciples’ awareness that the empty tomb signals the Risen Christ; to the bright light of Mary’s recognition of Christ in the garden.

This is a reasonable account of how any of us might meet a risen Christ. Mary’s observation to the disciples after seeing the empty tomb that “they have taken the Lord and we do not know where they have laid him,” echoes perhaps the question many of us have about Jesus, where does he come from and where is he going?

Some of us never get past that question. The players in the Gospel of Mark leave you with the feeling that they never do get it. Thank goodness for their example! Not a few of us enter the faith with the same perplexity.

But somehow, Peter and the other disciple get past Mary’s dilemma and make their way to the next stage of faith—a hunch-like assumption. When the beloved disciple gets to the tomb first he looks in and sees the grave cloths neatly rolled up on the sarcophagus.

The Gospel says the beloved disciple “saw and believed.” But I contend he believed more in the empty tomb than the Risen Christ. His first assumption was not that someone stole the body but that Christ somehow got free of death.

That may sound like splitting hairs but the fact the Peter and the beloved disciple just turn around and go home from the empty tomb tells me their experience was something less than conviction in the Risen Christ.

Jesus has yet to appear to anyone, to ascend to the Father, to give his post-resurrection commands and instructions. There’s a world of difference between having a hunch that something is true and being deeply convinced that it is.

Recently, I was visiting a church member in the hospital. Next to him was a patient who had suffered brain damage. I heard on the other side of the curtain the young man’s mother encouraging him to do his exercises. “I know you can do it,” she said again and again, “I will be here for you every day.”

If you are convinced of something—whether you can make a difference or that someone can get better from an illness or disease or that God will help you and them in the process, it makes all the difference to your actions and behavior. The other disciple was not yet convinced, but he had a hunch that Jesus was not dead. Maybe that’s where some of us are today.

Finally, according to John’s account we get to the full depth and recognition of faith. After her misidentification of Jesus, Mary returns to the tomb. Thinking him first to be the gardener, he calls her by name, “Mary,” and she says, “Rabbouni.”

What makes this scene so beautiful is how personal it is. Jesus calls her by name. She recognizes his voice. We received a call the other day from someone we had not seen in six years. Instantly, I recognized her voice.

And this is precisely the kind relationship with Jesus that awaits each one of us if we get beyond our initial fear and doubt, if we pursue our hunches, if we come back to search for God even in times of despair like Mary. This is not a once in a lifetime process but a journey that repeats itself again and again through life.

But maybe that Biblical account doesn’t do it for you today. The other place to meet the living Christ is to look around you. Rebecca quoted from the Gospel, “in him was light and he was the light of men and women.”

I’d wager if you think about it that you’ve seen Christ-light in someone. The light of life. Perhaps you didn’t think of it as Christ-light. Maybe it was just someone who helped you through a difficult time or some angel who happened into your life at just the right moment.

Sometimes those are significant events and sometimes small but what I am saying today is that they are bearers of Christ’s life, Christ’s light, Christ’s victory over the forces of death. And the object is not so much to find a tidy explanation for those moments as to be fully open to what they are—God at work in our lives. Otherwise we run the risk of going through life with blinders on, our peripheral vision, our wider vision of faith cut off.

Let me be more specific. Maybe you would say you have never met the risen Lord in some moment grand or small. Neither have I. If you mean a person walking up the street or coming to see you in the middle of the night with pierced hands and feet, I've never met him.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some have, but I never have. But if you mean the life that takes hold of a person and changes him from being self-centered and egotistical into an engaging, loving human being, I have seen him.

Or, if you mean the life that gradually developed an angry and spoiled teenager into one of the most sensitive, competent professionals in her field, I've seen him.

Or, if you mean a middle-aged person whose life had gone down the drain either in alcohol or something worse, and suddenly he begins to live and stand up, throw back his head, have a job, and be glad to be alive, if you mean that, I've seen him.

I have met that life. In fact, I think if it weren't for him I would just give up. For the darkness of life is deep and powerful and none of us can face it alone.

But we can face our lives like Mary when she met Christ and became the first follower of Jesus to spread the good news. Meeting her old teacher again in an entirely new way transformed Mary from a mourner into to a missionary.

She found the power of life. Or the power of life found her. It doesn't matter. She lived free of death in her new relationship to Jesus because his Father was now her Father and his God, her God.

The other side of Good Friday, Easter, is not about having less death, it's about having more life. So what's holding you and me back? Let's take the blinders off and see what happens. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Theodore Parker Ferris, "The Mysterious Fact of Resurrection," Selected Sermons (Boston: Trinity Church, 1971) 161. The theme of meeting the Risen Christ in others was taken from sermon.