



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
April 1, 2018 Sermon

Love Sees: The Joy of Unmasked Prayer—Answered

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 25:1, 6-9; John 20:1-10

Preface to the reading of John 20:10

Permission to be puzzled. I mean, here we are on Easter Sunday—Jesus Christ is Risen Today, The Day of Resurrection, the Oakwood Brass, the trumpets and the triumph, and all the rest of the wonderful celebration. Yet on that *first* Easter Sunday, in the passage I'm about to read, it's not all triumph and glory, not for a while at least . . . it *is*, well, a little *puzzling*.

To set the scene: It's early—still dark—on that first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene arrives at Jesus' tomb; she finds it empty, and thinks that someone has taken—stolen—his body. She rushes back to tell Peter and the “other disciple,” that is, the unnamed disciple who is identified in John's Gospel only as the “Beloved Disciple—the disciple whom Jesus loved.” And it's here things get puzzling. Peter and the beloved disciple go—and then begin to run—to the tomb. But why do they begin to run? This couldn't be good news . . . could it?

The Beloved Disciple gets there first, looks in, sees the grave clothes tossed aside, but *doesn't* go in; instead, he waits for Peter (in deference to the older—and slower?—man?). Anyway, Peter goes in the tomb first, the Beloved Disciple follows, and it's *now*, *only now* we're told, that the beloved disciple, and only the Beloved Disciple, sees *and* believes. But not Peter—not yet, anyway. The Beloved Disciple *believes*, but does not yet fully understand. Although exactly what he believes and exactly what he fails to understand aren't entirely clear, either. Not to mention why Peter doesn't yet believe. And then—without another word to each other or to Mary—they walk home.

It's puzzling. I'll talk about these puzzles later, in the sermon, but for now, permission to be puzzled. Listen now for God's Word, reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 20 verses 1-10 . . .

The Word of the Lord

In addition to answering all those puzzling questions, I'm also going to tell you the secret of writing a best-selling book, producing a hit movie, and developing a successful, long-running TV show. You can thank me later—my position here at Westminster does not preclude my receiving royalties.

You ready? Here it is: Keep 'em guessing. That's right, keep them guessing. Keep them on the edge of their seats, turning the pages, wondering what will happen next, wanting to know—wanting to know more than anything else—what will happen next, *and* especially how it will all end. From Jane Austen to JK Rowling, from Citizen Kane to Black Panther, from Law and Order to Game of Thrones—we want it all to come together in the end in a way that both surprises *and* satisfies. Few things are worse than an obvious, predictable plot where you can see the ending coming from a mile away. Except for maybe a random, incoherent plot, where the ending comes out of nowhere and has no connection to anything that went before it. In both cases, our reaction is the same: “This is stupid.” We want it to make sense, to hang together, but we also want it to surprise us. And please, don't talk to me about avant-garde plotless works, where nothing happens like *Waiting for Godot*. Yes, they make a statement, but as one of my teachers put it, “If I wanted to see that life is often just the same old same old, with *nothing* ever seeming to be resolved . . . well, I don't need a book, a movie, or a TV show to see *that*.”

And the *more* impossible it seems that things **will** be surprisingly and satisfyingly resolved, the *better* it is when they **are**. Take romantic comedies, for example. Before you even sit down with your popcorn, you know that these two belong together, and are going to get together—in the end. They were made for each other. But the best romantic comedies make it seem impossible: no way, the obstacles, both external (their parents opposed, their having different backgrounds) and especially internal (their opposing each other, their being so different)—the obstacles seem insurmountable; no way, it's never going to happen. The joy is when it does, when it all does come together in a way that brings everything together, in that surprisingly perfect way that brings them together, ending with a kiss of course (the genre requires it), with that kiss becoming a freeze frame as the credits begin to roll over it—**that's** when the joy of it all is made complete.

And by the way, lots of men like romantic comedies too, even if some of us won't admit it. And as for those who really **don't** like them . . . well, they go to sports movies instead, which are really just romantic comedies for male sports fans. Think about it: it seemed impossible, but the good guys, the underdogs, actually came together as a team—overcame all the obstacles (external and internal)—and in the end won the big game, *the championship!* The joy is when they do, when it all does come together in a way that brings everything together, in that surprisingly perfect way that brings them together, ending with a hoisting of the trophy of course (the genre requires it), with that hoisting becoming a freeze frame as the credits begin to roll over it—**that's** when the joy of it all is made complete.

We want it all to come together; we want the good guys to win in the end, we want that happy ending—the deepest and best part of us wants it all. And if we've given up on that, then we've simply given up on the deepest and best part of us. To go back to my teacher for a second: it's not just our stories that we want to be like that—it's our lives, life itself, real life, the story of the whole universe, we want it to be like that, too. The Easter message is that **it is**. That's what Easter is about—**it all coming true**.

But that story takes time—and in the meantime, sometimes, the obstacles do seem insurmountable, just because the plot is still unfolding. So we don't always see what's really happening, or grasp the full significance of what we do see, witness Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

Jesus told them. Several times in fact, he told them, told all his disciples: the son of man must be handed over to the authorities, lifted up on a cross, and then, on the third day, raised from the dead. And yet they seemed to have forgotten his words. But before you say, *How could they forget those words?*, remember how easy it is, when you're watching that movie or play or reading that book, how easy it is to get caught up in the moment, to be swept up in what's happening now, so that—while you're still hoping against hope for a happy ending, but you're beginning to fear that it's impossible—you forget what you've heard before, you miss the connection and the significance of events, and you don't see how they are all secretly coming together to bring about that promised happy ending. It's precisely because we do forget them and miss their significance that the ending is at once so surprising and so satisfying. And if that's true for our stories (which we watch or read in a relatively compressed period of time), how much for our lives (spread over many years), not to mention the life of the universe (spread over many light years).

I'll speak for myself here: It happens to me with some regularity: years later, I come to appreciate *for the first time* the significance of some past event in my life (that friendship I had as a young adult, that friend, at that time in my life, was a blessing, a blessing from God), a significance I had heretofore failed to appreciate, and no doubt still do not appreciate fully. The past is not over and done; it is open and ongoing. Insofar as we are still coming to understand its significance and insofar as its consequences are still unfolding, the past is open and ongoing. So when it comes to understanding what's really going on now, we're no different than Peter or the Beloved Disciple.

Nor is the Beloved Disciple that much different than Peter. Yes, the Beloved Disciple seems to grasp the significance of the empty tomb before Peter does. The Beloved Disciple believes, at least at some level, maybe only intuitively, that this means that Jesus *must—somehow*, in *some* way he cannot begin to fathom—**be alive!** (For one thing, grave robbers would never take the burial clothes off the body, it

would be much easier to carry with them on.) But it's clear that the Beloved Disciple, along with Peter, doesn't understand **how** everything has come together to bring this about. As John's Gospel puts it: "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

Remember: it's still dark when they run to the tomb—*now* the light is just beginning to dawn for both of them, even if the Beloved Disciple sees and believes a little more in the dim light of that early morning.

But still the question: Why? Why does the beloved disciple see more, even if only a little? Scholars, commentators, and readers have proposed all kinds of answers, but my thought is this: don't overlook the obvious: the answer is in the name.

What distinguishes the beloved disciple? That the beloved disciple **is** beloved. It is the love that Jesus had for that one—and presumably that that one had for Jesus—**that** is what enables the beloved disciple to begin to see the truth. Love is *not* blind—that is at best a half-truth. Love sees. Love sees more. Love sees more and believes more; love hopes more and knows more.

I remember when my father first began to die. He had had a fall—the first of what would prove to be several—and they sent him to the hospital as a precaution. After he had already been there a couple days, they did an MRI, which he also did not want—also as a precaution. When I finally got there, they gave me the MRI report to give to the doctor (that was probably some kind of HIPPA violation—but they did it.) It was in a big yellow envelope. I opened it, and was reading it, as I was wheeling him back to his hospital room.

There it all was, in five, single-spaced pages, every inch of him, from the inside out: from the crooked bone in his left arm (a bad break mis-set when he was a teenager) to the curving of his spine and the compression of certain, enumerated discs; it noted everything: from the location of his most recent meal in his digestive tract to the valve replacement in his heart. I stopped reading, letting it drop back into the envelope. I suppose, in one sense, the MRI could see all the way inside my father, all the way *to* his heart. But I could see more, especially **into** his heart. I knew him, had known him, had loved him, my whole life. And at that moment, I knew one thing for sure: he wanted me to get him out of this "damn hospital" (his words). And as for my heart, I promised him I would get him out, if I could ever find the "damn doctor" to sign the release. Love sees more and believes more; love hopes more and knows more.

This is not to say that there isn't a place for objectivity and impartiality. There is. (If you've ever been denied something important because of bias and favoritism—and who hasn't?—you know this.) But objectivity and impartiality do not have first place when it comes to seeing and believing and knowing. *Every* scientist worth his or her salt is driven by some passion, some love—and the best are driven by a passion for their subject and a love for its truth. It's that passion, that love—much more than the data—that drives them to see and believe and know more deeply.

And it's that same love that enables the Beloved Disciple to see and believe and know more deeply: that morning, he begins—just begins, mind you—to grasp the significance of the empty tomb. C.S. Lewis titled his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*. A lovely turn of phrase that, but in the case of the Beloved Disciple on that first Easter morning, *Stunned By Joy*, might be more like it.

And as for Peter . . . well, his day will come—and soon. In the next chapter, the last in John's Gospel, the risen Jesus appears before Peter. They're on the beach—again it's early in the morning. "Peter, do you love me?" Jesus asks him. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Twice more, Jesus asks the same question, and twice more Peter gives the same answer: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And after each answer, Jesus tells Peter what he must do: "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep."

You know, sometimes we *can* see the plot unfolding: it's a beautiful symmetry: past, present, and future. For each one of his *past* denials, Peter *now* affirms his love for Jesus; and with each affirmation, Jesus then shows Peter his future: he must share that love with the world. Now Peter too can see more: he sees the risen Jesus; he sees the reality of Jesus' resurrection and its meaning for his life and the world—

forgiveness, redemption, love. Love sees more and believes more; love hopes more and knows more.

But back to that first Easter: I wonder what Peter and the Beloved Disciple were thinking—were *praying*—as they began to go to the tomb that morning. Something like: “Please God, no. Please, don’t make it any worse than it already is; let him be there, God, let him be there.” Only he wasn’t there, and that proved to be far, far better than they could have ever imagined, ever dreamed. Death *seemed* to be the ultimate, final, insurmountable obstacle to the happy ending. They would never have thought, never have dreamed, never dared to pray, that it *too* might be overcome. And yet at some level, with the deepest and best parts of themselves, they never stopped wanting, never stopped believing, never stopped hoping even when all hope seemed lost . . . Somehow his words (even if they couldn’t quite recall them)—his promises, his love—had gotten inside them and still had a hold on their hearts. That’s why they began to run to the tomb, and that’s why the light began to dawn eventually for both of them: Love sees more and believes more; love hopes more and knows more.

It’s our *unmasked* prayers—the prayers we can’t even begin to articulate, much less ask—the deepest and best longings of our hearts—it’s when those unmasked prayers get answered—*that’s* when our joy is the greatest. It’s *then*—in *this* world—that we know the joy that lives for us—our lives, his life—beyond this world.

You *know* that these two—heaven and earth, God and humanity, our hearts’ deepest longings and the fulfillment of those longings—you *know* that these two belong together, and are going to get together—in the end. They were made for each other.

And when that day comes, when it all does come together in a way that brings everything together, in that surprisingly perfect way that brings them together, when all the crooked bones are set straight, when all the broken hearts are mended, when we all stand straight and tall, and see one another face-to-face, in love, as we were meant to, when we see God face-to-face, in love, as we were meant to, when we see everything real and true and good, everything and *everyone* we have ever loved, when we see *them* in God, and we see that God is all in all, . . . and all is peace . . . in *that* moment . . . in that moment of surprise *and* satisfaction . . . well, *what* will that moment be *like*?

When love and faithfulness meet, the Psalmist says, when righteousness and peace come together, the Psalmist says, *then* heaven and earth . . . will *kiss*. And maybe that kiss will become a freeze frame as the credits begin to roll over it. Or maybe they’ll roll over a freeze frame of all of us hoisting a trophy together . . . singing hymns of victory.

Or maybe . . . those credits will roll over a great feast, the way Isaiah envisions it:

The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a *feast* of rich food, a *feast* of well-aged wines.
The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, he will swallow up death forever.
This is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

No matter what the final image, *that’s* when the joy of it all will be made complete.

And in the meantime, we can pray that somehow Jesus’ words (even if we can’t quite recall them)—his promises, his love—will get inside *us* and hold *our* hearts. That’s why we come here on Easter Sunday morning: so that the light will begin to dawn for us, too. Love sees more and believes more; love hopes more and knows more.

Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!