

I. Intro.

Some of you may recall last fall we had a worship series on radical hospitality, and we urged the practice of seeing Jesus in the face of the stranger. In one of my sermons, I named my intention to participate in the recent Revive Indiana campaign, in a certain way: so I went out on an all-morning prayer outing with some Christians who I'd never met before. The aim was to approach total strangers in public places, at their homes or in churches and offer to pray with them.

Now if you know me, you know that this is not really my style, and this activity took me WAY out of my comfort zone. With a mix of spiritual adventure and wondering why I ever agreed to do this, I showed up one morning at Maple City Chapel. After the gathered prayer service, I was ready to be assigned to a praying group that would go out in a car into the local community.

As we huddled in our new groups, I noticed that one of the persons in my group was a woman in Amish dress (bonnet and all). I did not expect this, but the way it played out was even less expected: this ex-Amish woman was the driver and leader of our group! We drove through a modest neighborhood on the north side of Goshen, waiting to see if any of us felt led by the Spirit to pray at any particular location or with people we saw. When we saw two average young women in jeans & T-shirts watching some toddlers in an open garage, we swiftly pulled in.

It was this remarkable Amish-dressed woman who was first to open her car door, approach the apprehensive young caregivers and ask about praying with them! To my eyes, this was one of the strangest things I'd ever seen, but it worked! One of the young women had in fact heard of Revive Indiana, and she was very glad to be prayed for.

While I sat in the car quietly praying for this encounter taking place in front of me, I also began to see the woman in the bonnet with different eyes. You might say that her Amish apparel (for good or for bad) had come between us, so that I wasn't seeing who she really was. It was like I had a veil over my eyes. I had to start giving up my previous judgments that were based solely on external appearance. I began to see someone with a zeal for the Lord, and a heart for other people ... someone with a willingness to not be defined or confined by the way she was raised.

II. In our Easter story from the Gospel of John, **Mary Magdalene had a sort of veil over her eyes, too**

A. Much like that ex-Amish woman's appearance came between me and who she really was in Christ, so something also came between Mary and her ability to see the risen Jesus

1. That something was her own painful experiences from the last 3 days ... her expectations of what should be happening next
2. And why wouldn't she just see a gardener or a tomb caretaker in the one who was standing there asking her a question?

a) From Luke the physician we learned that this compassionate rabbi had already freed her from seven demons ...

(1) Jesus had turned her life around! In him she found the only life worth living ... No wonder that she loved him so much ...

b) No wonder that the events of those recent days seemed like a strange nightmare to her!

(1) Looking back she thought he certainly deserved praise and honor when he entered Jerusalem ...

(2) but why did he have to thumb his nose at the Romans?

(3) Why did he have to mock their pompous display of power by staging his own alternative parade of humility on a donkey, as Pastor Katie highlighted last week?

c) From the disciples Mary heard about the Passover meal Jesus hosted and the shocking words he put in there, about his own body and blood!

d) She saw with her own eyes the bloody effects of the beating and the flogging he took, of that ghastly crown of thorns pressed on his head

e) She heard the awful nails pounded into his flesh, and the tears she cried as he died up there, naked and broken ... those were just the first drops in the buckets she wept over that weekend

B. No, the loss of her dear friend Jesus was just too acute ... it was too overwhelming in that early Sunday darkness

1. The tears in her eyes were reason enough not to recognize Jesus
2. Besides, he was D-E-A-D dead, and she had followed and seen for herself where his body had been laid.
3. Although it had been late on Friday and the Sabbath was almost upon them, she had waited long enough to watch Joseph of Arimathea roll that heavy wheel-shaped stone in its trough ... she saw him secure it across the tomb entrance
4. Finding the tomb empty was the last thing she expected on Sunday morning, because dead bodies stay where they are put, unless somebody moves them!

C. And yet my friends this is the amazing thing ... this is the power of the Easter story that we don't get tired of hearing:

1. He didn't stay dead! By the power of God, he shattered that barrier of death that had been separating humans from God
2. This Lenten season we've been focusing on the biblical covenants God made with God's people, because there was always something impenetrable coming between us and our divine Creator
3. But in his death and resurrection, Jesus became that "between", so there would be nothing permanent between us and God!

4. The resurrection of Jesus did not eliminate the existence of sin as something that separates us from God, but it did destroy the power of sin to keep us ultimately and eternally separated from God!

III. Today we celebrate the removal of barriers, the lifting of veils that prevent us from seeing God at work ...

A. We celebrate the crumpling of walls that prevent us from living into the kingdom God wants to see spreading everywhere!

B. In essence, Easter is about so-called "normal" boundaries that are missing ...

1. it's about expected barriers taken down
2. Let's look a little closer at this powerful story from John 20 ... to find some of these missing barriers

IV. As I studied this story, I found 4 examples of barriers that are missing or removed:

A. 1st = The stone has been removed (in v. 1)

1. This is the easiest one because it's most literal ... a big heavy physical barrier that's no longer there ... quite obvious
2. This missing barrier is a clue about what's coming, but by itself it's not proof

B. 2nd (in v. 5-7) = **the strips of linen and the head cloth, w/ no body**

1. This missing barrier is still a tangible physical one, but it's more difficult to explain
 - a) In simple terms, the head cloth and the linens were there to separate the dead body from the earth and to keep those burial spices in place around the body
 - b) This is more like what we might call proof of a miraculous event, because it makes little sense for a thief to leave these cloths behind
2. If someone really wanted to steal or damage the body, why would they take the time & effort to unwrap it and leave the cloths still in their respective places where the head and feet had been?
3. And why would someone want to directly contact a dead body without those wrappings?
4. I believe the linens found by the disciples and Mary inside the tomb were meant to show that something miraculous had happened!

C. A 3rd missing barrier is not physical but instead intangible: **the barrier between seeing & believing, found in v. 8 re. "beloved disciple"**

1. Read v. 8

2. Beloved disciple usually considered to be John, brother of James ... he was moved beyond merely seeing to believing

a) He was the first person to believe in Jesus' resurrection without actually seeing the risen Christ

b) In v. 9 we get a clue about the important difference between what Peter and John first experienced at the empty tomb (*read 9*)

(1) It's not clear if that verse is describing only Peter or if it applies to all the disciples, including the beloved one

(2) Because of this, it may not be a full and complete understanding that John had in that moment, but he was no longer denying what he had seen.

(3) Whether or not he fully knew what this meant or how to explain it, in that moment he believed that Jesus was risen

3. It's an old proverb that "Seeing is believing", meaning that you need to see something first in order to believe it.

a) This is a staple of science, and we all depend on scientific understandings to a huge degree in our lives. If something is wrong with our bodies, our cars, our houses we diagnose & fix those problems based upon scientific ways of observation and thinking

b) But as a person of faith I also recognize some limits to that old cliché: There is more to this world than what we can see, and hear with our senses

(1) When Peter left the empty tomb having seen the evidence but not yet believing it, that was an example of "Seeing is believing"

(2) Later on in John ch. 20 when Jesus re-appears to the gathered frightened disciples, and Thomas demands to see and feel Jesus' hands and wounded side, that too shows "Seeing is believing"

(3) But what happens with the "beloved disciple" in today's text illustrates an example of an alternate truth: "Believing is seeing"

c) I found a YouTube video from the Our Daily Bread devotions that helps illustrate this alternate truth ... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tExCE5-ioas>

D. 4th missing barrier not quite the same as the last one between seeing & believing: **This is between sight and recognition** (or perhaps between seeing & understanding) ... in v. 14-16

1. Mary did not recognize Jesus when she first saw him at the tomb

- a) As I said before, her own tears are an obvious explanation for this barrier, but that rationale is too simple
- b) The more likely cause for this barrier within Mary Magdalene was the limitations of her expectations ... of her imagination
 - (1) We've already reviewed how her expectations led her to see Jesus without recognizing him
 - (2) In her grief and shock, she saw a practical problem: the body of her Lord had been stolen
 - (3) Therefore she expected to find some practical solution: this man must be someone who could tell her where to find the body
- c) It was the voice of her Teacher, her Rabbi who broke through that recognition barrier ... who got her to see God's presence & God's activity beyond the limits of her own expectations

2. This barrier between sight & recognition was not unique to Mary Magdalene, nor was it unique to biblical times

3. It happens to us also, 2000 years later ... Sometimes our own expectations prevent us from seeing what is right there, even when the "between thing" is removed,

- a) One example is in our religious expectations such as in my story of the ex-Amish woman who drove us around to pray in the community
- b) Another way we sometimes fail to move from sight to recognition is with our assumptions about age or disabilities:
 - (1) There was a young man named Jack at a Christian college in Australia, who described part of his day with other students on an outing to an aged care centre not far from the college. This is part of Jack's description of the day:

An awesome guy named Ross gave us a brief introduction to the centre. Ross is the senior chaplain and was our main guide for the day. After Ross' introduction, he gave us a tour of one of the upstairs residential wards. I noticed we were all very quiet as we walked around the centre. There was a sense of unfamiliarity and uncomfortableness at first, which later disappeared. You don't come across many people with advanced dementia in regular life because they're usually in facilities like this.

As the day progressed, we started chatting with some of the residents and were able to hear some of their stories. Heejay and I chatted with a man who was quite deaf, and tended to repeat himself a lot. Naturally, it was a little difficult talking to someone that repeated the same things for a good half hour, but in the end we could see the difference it made to his day. By just sitting down and having a conversation with this guy, we were hopefully able to help him feel important and valued. That brought me a lot of joy.

To end the day, a lady with dementia came in and played the piano for us. Now, we were told this lady couldn't remember what she had for lunch, let alone remember her piano lessons as a child. BUT she walked in, took a seat on the piano stool, and played us this incredible sounding symphony which seemed SO effortless ... it just poured out of her. You could see how happy it made her – that this class of students all sat around the piano listening to her and applauding after each song. She was smiling from ear to ear! That's God's love right there.

(Adapted from Jack Vidgen at www.morlingcollege.com/the.../seeing-jesus-first-time-finding-jesus-dementia-ward/)

(2) I know many of you can testify that stories like this, of seeing Jesus in unexpected people, are repeated every day around here, in places like Greencroft and Cottage Gardens.

(3) Sometimes we just have to show up and spend some time, & then **we start seeing** with that resurrection vision.

V. Conclusion

A. On this Easter Sunday I ask you, "When, like Mary Magdalene, have you failed to recognize the risen Christ right in front of you?"

1. When have you not seen Jesus at work because of some "veil" over your sight?
2. What kind of "filter" is still coming between you and God?

B. The good news of Easter is that ultimately there is no barrier between you and the self-sacrificing God who took away that separating wall of death and sin!

C. The God who raised Jesus from the dead is in the business of blowing up your assumptions and helping you see unexpected things!

1. Watch out when you leave here today, because you might not recognize the people you see when that old veil is lifted...
2. After all ... when it comes to God's way of working, in the light of the resurrection ... **believing is seeing!**