

“FOUR STORIES: EASTER”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Hebrews 12:1-2

John 20:1-18

And just like that, we’re down to the last one! When I was planning this last sermon series, I had no trouble picking the scriptures for this last one, especially the Gospel lesson. The Easter passage from John is a portrayal of one of the most profound encounters with the Lord in all of scripture, and a moving account of a moment in time that changed all of life forever.

You know the story as well as I do. Mary Magdalene, a woman of faith whose life was completely changed by Jesus, is bent over with grief after he has been crucified on the cross. She is devastated, not knowing how she’ll go on, filled with that panic that one experiences after the loss of a loved one.

She goes to the tomb in the wee hours of the morning. She just needed to be there. If you’ve ever lost a loved one, you know that there’s some comfort in going to their grave, even just for a moment.

Mary went to his grave, but when she got there, she was stunned to see that the great, huge stone that had covered it, had been rolled away. And even more stunning, more devastating, she discovered that his body was gone.

It is hard to imagine what that sight did to her. Absolute devastation, utter hopelessness, panic even. She runs to tell someone, some of the disciples. They come back with her, see what she has seen, but then they return to their homes.

Not Mary. She stays and weeps, and weeps, and weeps. She sees angels and when they ask why she is weeping, she tells them – and still she weeps.

Then she turns around and sees a man, who she supposes is the gardener. Who else would be there at that time of day? He too asks her why she is weeping, and she explains that someone had taken away the body of her Lord, and if he knew anything, would he please tell her.

He didn’t answer her question, he simply, and I believe quietly and gently said her name, “Mary” – almost, I imagine, like a question. “Mary?” Like, “Mary, it’s me Jesus.”

No doubt, Mary made the journey from utter, devastating grief to unutterable and unimaginable joy in that split second when Jesus said her name. And at the

end of that passage, comes the reason that I love it so very much – when Jesus tells her to go and tell others that he was alive. The first preacher of the Good News of the Gospel – of life after death - was a woman! What were the words of that first sermon? “I have seen the Lord!”

Millions and millions of people over the centuries have longed to have an experience like that with Jesus – a face to face encounter with him. Mary did, others did, but many, many others have not. Yet, all of us can say with her, “I have seen the Lord!”

So, if you’ll indulge me this morning, I want to spend some time in this my last sermon telling you about ways I too have seen the Lord – for there have been so very many.

I first saw the Lord through my family. There is not a moment in my life where Jesus wasn’t a part of it. From the day I was born, I was a part of the church every Sunday – literally, because my father was always a choir director in a church. On March 25, 1956, five months after I was born, they went to the baptismal font of Sarah Jane Johnson Memorial Methodist Church in Johnson City New York, where the Rev. Francis Freeman baptized me Karen Frances Bunnell.

After that, they took me to Sunday School, and I sang in church choirs, and learned about faith through them and in so many other ways. From the day I was born, until this day, my family has been a sign to me of Christ’s love, and their never-ending love and support has sustained me and nurtured me every step of the way. “I have seen the Lord” through my family.

I know you think that I’m saving this church until the end, but you must remember that you were a part of my life a long time ago as well – for I saw the Lord here when I was in elementary school – when we first moved to Elkton. Here I was lovingly nurtured through worship and Sunday School, by people like Virginia Biles, Sandra Holland, Doris Bryan and others. They taught me the stories of Jesus, and how to live as a faithful disciple.

It was here, on April 28, 1968, after taking confirmation classes with Rev. Thomas, that my friends and I were confirmed. I learned things in that class that I still teach to others today.

When I was a youth, our family became members of Asbury United Methodist Church in New Castle, where Dad had become the choir director. I was active there until I went off to college, and it was at college that I saw the Lord in a whole new way. Because as I’ve told you before, I had a really tough adjustment to college – the worst case of homesickness ever. On top of that, for the first time ever in my life, I wasn’t going to church.

And I remember distinctly, one conversation with my mother, on a Friday night. I was miserable, crying over the phone to her. She said to me, “Why don’t you go to church on Sunday?” And I replied, “Because I don’t know anybody there.” And you know what she said? “Yes, you do. God is there.”

I went, and God was there, and things began to get better.

After I graduated from college, I moved back home and began a few years of searching for who I was supposed to be and what I was going to do. I worked in a number of different jobs – as a title searcher, a secretary for a tank company in New Castle, a secretary at the University of Delaware, and a few others, but I knew I hadn’t found where I was supposed to be. But even in those places, I saw the Lord, and after I had gone from them, and looked back on them, I saw that God had been at work in me through those jobs to prepare me for the future.

At the same time as I was doing those jobs, I had gotten involved again at Asbury Church, and it was there that I meant some of the spiritual giants of my life – Tom Short, Glenn Catley and Ron Bergman. I could not have had better examples of being a good pastor than Tom and Glenn, and it was Ron, who, as I told you a few weeks ago, opened the door for me to sense a call to ministry from God. Surely, I saw the Lord at Asbury Church, where I was blessed to be in leadership and from which I started the journey into pastoral ministry.

One of the greatest gifts God ever gave me was my three years in Washington at Wesley Theological Seminary. My time there was life-changing and so affirming for me. It was a time to wrestle with theology, learn how to be a pastor, and be surrounded by really wonderful people – some of whom are dear friends even today. More than that, it was at Wesley that I found my voice. For years, I had been afraid to speak in front of groups, or be a leader – Wesley helped me find my voice. It was and is to this day an incredible place, which is why I encouraged Brett and Carlos to go there – and I know they had the same experience too. I, absolutely, saw the Lord at Wesley Seminary!

While I was at Wesley, I did a student internship at a church by Andrews Air Force Base, named Forest Memorial United Methodist Church. They were the kindest people, treating this rookie Student Pastor with love and care, and they taught me first how to be a pastor. Again, I made friends there who are still my friends – including my dearest friends Linda and Hugh Southall.

After seminary, I got my first appointment – as an Associate Pastor at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Wilmington. At that time, Aldersgate had 2100 members and I was one of three appointed pastors on the staff. The best news of all was that my former pastor and forever mentor Tom Short was the Senior

Pastor, and for twelve and a half years, we worked side by side in ministry. Those were wonderful years in a wonderful congregation that did amazing things and were , and continue to be, a beacon of faith in Jesus Christ for the community! I loved my years at Aldersgate, even though I took a lot of ribbing (mostly from other pastors) for being an Associate Pastor for 12 and a half years, when I could have had churches on my own. I stayed there as long as I felt God wanted me there, and only moved when I sensed he was calling me to. I cherished my time at Aldersgate and thank everyone there, many of whom have told me they watch our services on line. Friends, I saw the Lord in my time with all of you.

Then, in January of 2000, I walked back in the door of Elkton United Methodist Church as the Senior Pastor, the first woman Senior Pastor to serve here. I remember on my first Sunday looking out and seeing my old Sunday School teachers smiling with tears in their eyes. I remember seeing my father with tears in his eyes, trying not to let me see them.

None of us ever imagined what the next twenty years would bring. You know the Dr. Suess book “Oh, the Places You’ll Go”? I kind of feel like that could be the subtitle to my twenty years here with you. Oh, the places we’ve gone together.

The ways I have seen the Lord here are astounding, and I could never tell you them all, but let me tell you a few –

I have seen the Lord through worship here. I watch every Sunday as you come into the room and greet each other with smiles, hugs and kisses, and it warms my heart to know that you are bound together in Christian love. My heart soars with the beautiful music offered here – by our wonderful choirs, our gifted musicians. More than once, my heart has filled to overflowing through the music offered in this place. I have seen the hundreds and hundreds of you who, over the years, have enabled Sunday morning worship to take place – ushers, readers, greeters, hospitality providers, parking lot attendants, tech personnel – oh, the list goes on and on. I have seen the Lord in all of you who step up to make worship possible. And I especially want to say that I have seen the Lord very profoundly in my partners in ministry – our Worship Leaders – wonderful, faithful brothers and sisters who give their all for the Lord.

I have seen the Lord through the spiritual growth opportunities in this church – Sunday School, Bible studies, Vacation Bible School, Emmaus, youth group – the list goes on and on. I will always be grateful for the times I was able to teach and lead – Lenten Lunch and Learn, confirmation classes, new members classes, and time with my beloved Beginnings gang.

I most assuredly have seen the Lord through the mission life of this church. I've been in and around a lot of churches, but have never experienced a focus on missions like this church has. I've watched in awe as, over the twenty years I've been here, the missions budget has tripled. I'm speechless each year with the giving to UMCOR, and so many local, national and international missions projects. I'm touched to watch a church that takes on so many big projects be equally committed to serving in a local community kitchen or elementary school. In these and so many other ways, I have seen the Lord through the missions work of this church.

Of course, I have seen the Lord through your dedication to keeping this building a place fit for people to come to know Jesus, which means, over these 20 years, we've pretty much renovated the entire church, little by little, and of course, taking on some mighty big projects – like the addition of the Wesley Wing – and bonus, paying off all of the projects, mostly ahead of schedule. That says so much about your commitment to the Lord.

I could go on and on. I have surely seen the Lord in our partnerships with the other churches of GEMA – the Greater Elkton Ministerial Alliance. Our work with all of them has been a tremendous witness for the Lord in our town.

I have even seen the Lord in the tough times we've gone through – when finances were a struggle, when we chose to talk about controversial issues rather than avoid them – even then, God was there; even then, I saw the Lord through you.

Finally, let me talk about people. Through your faithful witness, people from this church felt the call to ministry – Patty, Brett, Carlos, Sarah. You're a part of their story – they are who they are, and where they are today, because you were there for them.

And the staff. I have been blessed to work alongside a whole lot of people over these twenty years. Dedicated, dear, gifted people of God who made my job easier because they did their jobs so well. They shared their faith in warm and wonderful ways that have touched so many lives, including mine.

And finally, I have seen the Lord, as I have been blessed to have been a part of significant days in your lives – when I officiated your weddings, baptized your babies, and even held funerals for loved ones. What a profound honor it has been that you have allowed me to be a part of the significant events of your lives – and what a joy!

The bottom line is that, my dear friends, I have seen the Lord through all of you. I have seen him in your faith, in your desire to grow and serve, in the way you love and care for each other, and in the many ways you have loved and cared for me.

My prayer as I retire from active ministry is that I have had a hand in helping you see the Lord, in helping you grow in faith, and helping you understand how much God loves you and always will. If I have, then I have answered the call God placed on my life.

Now, I go forward to answer the call in a new way, and I can't wait to experience all the ways I will see the Lord in the days and years ahead. I pray God's blessings upon you as you begin your journey with Eric, a wonderfully gifted man, who I know will lead you well.

And so I end with the only words left to say: Thank you! I have seen the Lord through you and I will be forever grateful. Thanks be to God!

Amen.