

Seeing Jesus
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“Seeing Jesus” Pilgrim Church UCC, April 16, 2017, (John 20:1-18) Easter Sunday

In October something amazing happened at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. For 60 hours researchers had the opportunity to examine the holiest site in Christianity—the tomb of Jesus Christ. Repairs to the church have been ongoing and the tomb itself hadn't been opened for hundreds of years. The tomb consists of a limestone shelf (what's called a burial bed) that was hewn from the wall of a cave. Since 1555 and most likely far earlier, this burial bed was covered by marble to prevent people from removing parts of the rock to take home as a souvenir. Some things never change!

Anyway when the marble cladding was removed on October 26 an inspection was carried out by the National Technical University of Athens and they found a layer of fill material underneath the slab. Though as researchers continued their work, they found another marble slab further down in the ground with a cross carved into its surface. By the night of October 28 with only hours before the tomb ended up resealed, these researchers discovered the original limestone burial bed intact after all these centuries. Fredrik Hiebert, National Geographic's archaeologist-in-residence said: “I'm absolutely amazed. My knees are shaking a little bit because I wasn't expecting this. We can't say 100 percent, but it appears to be visible proof that the location of the tomb has not shifted through time, something that scientists and historians have wondered for decades.”[1]

To fully appreciate this discovery we should know that there's been debate about whether the location of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (which contains what Christian Tradition says is the tomb of Jesus Christ) could be the authentic burial place of any Jew let alone Jesus of Nazareth. It was Jewish practice for people to be buried outside the walls of Jerusalem. From the Gospels alone we know that Jesus was buried outside the city. In the 20th Century there was archaeological work done and at least six other tombs were found nearby. So yes, this could have been the site of a Jewish cemetery—the boundaries of Jerusalem have just changed over time.

At one point where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands today there was a Roman Temple above Christ's tomb and then a church. Then came the Crusades and that church was razed to the ground and eventually another church went up in the 11th century. That's why you have a National Geographic archeologist who says that his knees began to shake as the marble and debris were taken away and the holy bed was discovered intact after all the chaos happening above throughout centuries of turmoil. The tomb has since been resealed and the Edicule which sits in the middle of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the tomb way down below has been reinforced with titanium. It will never be opened again in our lifetimes anyway. That happened six months ago—it's not a movie plot from Dan Brown for The Da Vinci Code Part 2 or the next Indiana Jones movie. Maybe you heard about it, maybe you didn't. But this discovery sent shockwaves throughout Christian circles (or at least among church nerds like myself) because we've wondered what's really below this human-made structure that the Church has said sits on top of the tomb of Jesus. And it ends up that there really is a tomb down there with the limestone burial bed still intact after all these centuries. It's crazy!

Now can we make the leap of faith that this is for sure the tomb of Jesus Christ and the very spot where the Resurrection occurred? That's a question I can't really answer for you, and that can't be proven historically. Though when you're inside the inner sanctum of the Edicule there

really is an ancient tomb beneath your feet. An empty tomb that Christian Tradition says Jesus rose from on Easter morning to show forever that love wins and death isn't the end of God's story.

For a long time, John's Gospel has been regarded as the least historical and the most spiritual of our four Gospels. Though perhaps the author knew more than we often give him credit for. There's a story in the fifth chapter for instance where Jesus heals a man who had been ill for 38 years. This was long-thought to be purely metaphorical because the Pool of Beth-zatha near the Sheep Gate which had five porticoes as described in the Gospel didn't even exist.[2] Until archaeologists discovered the pool and the five porticoes exactly as John described when doing excavation work in 1878. Amazed by seeing the pool outside the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem I shared the picture I took of this holy site on social media (love photography.) And a former seminary professor commented on my photo (yes we're Facebook friends!) saying, "Yep. 'Tradition' is a lot stronger and more reliable than a lot of us progressive westerners have been schooled to believe." All of these archaeological discoveries are amazing. Instead of explaining away these events in the Gospels, sometimes these discoveries help confirm holy sites.

You know, the story of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ according to the "least historical" Gospel of John is such a beautiful story. No matter what we may know or not know about its historical accuracy—this story has lasted the test of time. Just look at the devotion of Mary Magdalene. Mary comes to the tomb when it's still dark outside. When she sees something's amiss she runs to get Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and they run to see what's happening. There's such hopeful urgency. In some ways (though they don't realize it yet) they are running right into the arms of God.

Think about the miracle in that action. Literally running toward mystery. Running toward something that you don't understand. Compare Mary and Peter and the Beloved Disciple to how we too often live our lives. We sometimes fail to recognize all the gifts we receive and just be thankful. Sometimes when God comes calling, we slam the door. There's something we don't understand? Avoidance may help or let's go fight them! But not these disciples. They all of a sudden have more courage than ever when they run to see Jesus. When they run to find out what just happened to their teacher and friend, running toward that mystery, toward what they don't understand with hearts open wide.

When Mary Magdalene confronts Christ (who she mistakenly thinks is a gardener at first) she cries in despair and says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." [3] She is desperate to find Jesus and somehow make things right. Mary Magdalene, not the eleven disciples remaining after the events of Thursday and Friday we just observed in Christian churches—Mary Magdalene becomes the first person to encounter the Risen Christ. There will never not come a day when I don't point this out to anyone who gets snarky about ministers who happen to be women. First person to encounter the Risen Christ? Oh yeah, Mary Magdalene. Mic drop. "I have seen the Lord" is what Mary proclaims for all to hear.[4]

So even though we may hesitate to take that leap of faith when it comes to the mystery of Easter, there's also a historical reality here. There really is an empty tomb discovered only six months ago beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem where our Tradition says that Jesus rose. More importantly, Jesus' movement and teachings could have died with him. Only they didn't. Whatever we believe happened on Easter—a whole new way of being, a whole new way of seeing the world came rushing into peoples' lives. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg (who always had a way of speaking to Progressive Christians) once wrote that "the historical ground of Easter is very simple: the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death . . . Christians throughout the

centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past.”[5]

Like Mary Magdalene we can see the Risen Christ. And we can't contain God in our safe comfortable boxes any more than folks could contain Jesus in that tomb. Instead, let's respond to the mysterious, loving, awe-inspiring presence of God. Let's get up and run to the tomb, to see what there is to discover. For God's loving-kindness is still alive. And we may be Easter people living too often in a Good Friday world. But we are God's Easter people—and yes, we too can see the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Kristen Romey, “Unsealing of Christ's Reputed Tomb Turns Up New Revelations,” National Geographic, October 31, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/10/jesus-christ-tomb-burial-chur...>

[2] John 5:2, NRSV.

[3] John 20:13.

[4] John 20:18.

[5] Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, 135.