

April 12, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

Early in the Morning

John 20:1-18

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

It seems to me that there are two main kinds of discovery that we make in our lives. The one is a result of our looking and trying hard to find answers, the kind of discovery that comes from search, investigation, profound inquiry so that we come at last to a place where the pieces of the puzzle come together. I think in the Bible, the Wise Men that we meet in Matthew the second chapter, at the very beginning of our Lord's life, the Magi, they represent this kind of discovery. They're looking. They've traveled a long way to look for a king born in Israel. I think great explorers like Lewis and Clark are in this kind of discovery mode. They're looking and they're searching for a passageway. Martin Luther was this kind of discoverer. He searched so hard, so long to try to find forgiveness, to find redemption. He made trips to Rome. He made all these journeys that he went through. Finally in the study of Romans, he made the discovery where the pieces of the puzzle came together. Thank God for people who do this kind of inquiry, this kind of search.

The other kind of discovery though is different. The other kind of discovery happens by surprise when you think there's nothing more to find. There's nothing that really could change the outcome anymore. Nothing really matters now that you could find that would make anything different. We may even think that it's too late to make a discovery or maybe we've just given up searching. And then, there it is. The answer that brings the pieces of the puzzle together. But this time it happens by surprise. The discovery of penicillin was like this. It was an accident that happened in the midst of a scientific inquiry. They weren't even looking in that direction. And that's how penicillin was discovered. Sometimes, we're even looking in the wrong direction and we make a discovery.

Can I tell you a story? I had a friend in Seattle, his name is Al. And when he was in college, he drove the Gray Line bus. It was his job. He had a chauffeur's license so he could drive the bus from Seattle to the Sea-Tac Airport and pick up passengers and then bring them back to the hotels, and then he would pick them up at the hotels and take them back to Sea-Tac. He knew that route and he never got lost and that was just a terrific job. Then one day, the Gray Line, which also offered tours for out-of-town tourists said, "You know, our regular tour driver for the Mount Rainier tour run is ill today so you get to take that run. And here's the map." Maybe not like Map-Quest, but they had a map and they had the route, and they even had things to say along the way to enlighten the tourists because these were tourists from the Midwest. They were going to see Mount Rainier. They were going to go up to a great vantage point where they could get this unobstructed, incredible view of this great mountain 14,420 feet high, 40 glaciers. I mean, that's a real mountain. They were going to go see this mountain.

The only problem with Seattle is we have leaden skies problem. It causes some people to have what they call SADD, seasonal affective depressive disorder, from just too much overcast skies. I've gone for weeks and weeks in Seattle where no one has ever seen Mount Rainier. It's there but no one sees it because of the lead skies. This was one of those days. And he drove his

busload of passengers. So he'd point out and say, "Now, if you could see out this vantage point, this is what you would see there. And out this side, this is what you'd see." He was very authoritative. And he drove them up to the great final point which was the parking lot at the vantage point.

Unfortunately, there was not an arrow there. That's something they should put on a vantage point like that, an arrow that says, "Mount Rainier is this way." But there wasn't. They just expected that you'd know where to look. And so when he got to this point, he decided to fake it. And because he did have, again, descriptions he then said, "Now folks," and he got all of his passengers facing in this one direction, he said, "Now, if you could see Rainier with the 40 glaciers, this is what you would see out this vantage point; this is the north face. And you would see where Camp Sherman is, you'd see all these amazing things if only you could see it. Unfortunately, it's a lead sky day and we can't, so this is what you'd see in that direction." Just then a passenger in the bus who was looking in the other direction while he had everyone facing his direction asked a question, "Well, what is this mountain over here?" And without turning around, this was his mistake, Al said, "Well that's Toad Peak there. There are some little mountains around too, that's Toad Peak." Whereupon this man from New Hampshire said, "If that's Toad Peak, I'd love to see Rainier" and then it became clear, it was the great Mt. Rainier with all 40 glaciers. Al had had them all looking in exactly the wrong direction. And that was a great discovery and the pieces of the puzzle did come together for him.

Think about this. All of the disciples of Jesus Christ are confronted and confirmed in the discovery of the real victory of Jesus of Nazareth, their friend, their Lord. His victory over sin, death, and the power of evil that he won on the cross. The confirmation of that victory, the victory itself, was confirmed to these disciples, to every single disciple in the second way of discovery, not the first way.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. She goes looking not for the liv-

ing Christ, the Christ alive, but she goes looking for a Christ who's died. She wants to find His body. In fact, all four gospels make it clear that the women were the first at the tomb. All four gospels make it clear they were going wondering how they could properly arrange for the burial of Jesus because they had hastily buried Him because it was the eve of Passover, eve of the Sabbath and they couldn't do it rightly. And that's what they're all looking for. And Mary says, when she sees the tomb is empty, she runs back to the disciples and says to them, "They have taken away the Lord." Peter and John run to the tomb. Notice, John runs faster, he's younger. Peter gets there, they look in the tomb, they see the grave clothes there. And the text says, "And when they saw it, they believed," but don't misunderstand that word, "believe" there. John then makes it very clear with the next line, "for they did not yet know that Christ must rise from the dead." They believe what Mary said that someone had obviously stolen the body. Someone has taken the body of Jesus. And then they go back to their home.

None of the disciples make the discovery in the first way like the Magi, like the Wise Men that come to find the living Christ. They simply aren't expecting that. The disciples then meet Jesus that night in a locked room. They're behind closed doors. Luke tells us about two disciples on the road to Emmaus that have already totally given up and they decided to go home. And while they're on their way home, Jesus meets them on the road. They don't recognize Him. And He says, "Why are you so sad?" They answer, "Haven't you heard? The one who we thought would be the Redeemer, He's been put to death. We've lost everything," and they're already on their way home. And then Jesus, in that marvelous meal with them, reveals Himself to them on the road to Emmaus.

The women are looking for the dead Jesus to try to help bury him. And Mary Magdalene, when she sees Jesus in the garden, she thinks he's the gardener and says, "Where have you taken Him?" And she makes the discovery by surprise when he says her name, "Mary." And then she goes back and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." The first preachers of the gospel are the women at the tomb. It still happens that way today. An awful lot of

people make the greatest discoveries in life by surprise. Sometimes they're not even looking in the right direction and they make the discovery. Sometimes they just have given up and feel there is nothing more to find and they make the discovery.

One of the most impressive books that I've read on this kind of discovery, this second kind of discovery, is the book by Malcolm Muggeridge called *Jesus Rediscovered*. It tells the story of his conversion to Christianity. Malcolm Muggeridge was an atheist. He was a journalist with the *Manchester Guardian* and he decided he wanted to go to Russia during the USSR period, to go there and to write an article for the *Guardian* on the death of religion in Russia because Lenin had predicted just one generation left of old folks and then religion will be over. So he went to Russia to find that out. He made the mistake of going at Easter time. And though most of the churches in Moscow had been closed or turned into museums, still there were churches open and they were jammed with people. Malcolm Muggeridge, who went to write an article about the death of religion, the death of the Russian Orthodox Church, went to a worship service and saw the faces of all the people as they said, "Christ has risen. He has risen indeed." And he wrote in *Jesus Rediscovered*, "I looked at their El Greco like faces," I love that line, "and I realized that they were right and Stalin was wrong." Right then, he made the prediction that the communist veneer was a thin veneer over Russian character and it would evaporate sooner or later and it did sooner than anyone ever imagined. Isn't it interesting? The national anthem of Russia today is a Russian Orthodox Hymn. Malcolm Muggeridge became a Christian when he saw these believers who believed in the victory of Jesus Christ but he wasn't looking for it. He was looking in the opposite direction and yet Jesus found him. And that's the way all the disciples make the discovery.

I believe that this helps us understand the three best historical proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As I see it, the three greatest proofs of the resurrection of Christ is first of all, that the confirmation of Jesus alive came by surprise to the disciples. They were not searching for it or even expecting it. Jesus found them when they weren't looking for him. Not looking for Jesus

alive, they were looking for Jesus dead but not Jesus alive. And that's the first great proof of the resurrection. And all the gospels make that clear. They did not expect it. Johann Sebastian Bach in his great *Passion According to Saint Matthew*, ends the Good Friday scene with that sad song, "Ah, Golgotha! Unhappy Golgotha!" The world's Redeemer there dies but now that He is dead, who shall the world's redeemer be? Who could be the redeemer now? He's dead. And that's what the two men on the road to Emmaus say. "We had thought, we had hoped, but now it's all lost." That's the first proof of the resurrection is that the message of hope, of Jesus alive, came to them when they weren't looking for it.

The second proof has to do with evidence. Have you ever thought of this? That the essential evidence of the victory of Christ is uninteresting? If you see one empty tomb, you've seen them all. Have you ever thought of that? In fact, that's exactly what the angels say to the women—you see at Matthew's account and Luke's account also. The women and Mary and the other Mary's, Salome and others that went to the tomb, they're told this by the angel: "Why seek you the living among the dead? He's not here. He's not here." The empty tomb is precisely a profound proof in that the evidence is uninteresting. And the angels are the one's who themselves made this point. The early church shows no interest in the tomb of Christ. Unlike every other political religious movement which is so focused on the tomb, after all, in Israel it is the tomb of David where the Wailing Wall is, the great tomb of David, Mt. Zion. The tomb of Abraham is so important; not for the early Christians. They are not interested in the empty tomb. It was only later that the tourist industry became interested in, "Where's the empty tomb?" And that's why you have the argument in Jerusalem today as to which is the right empty tomb. Well, who cares? If you've seen one empty tomb, you've seen them all. The early Christians were not interested. We have no record at all of St. Paul or others coming back to Jerusalem and saying, "We've got to go to the tomb of Jesus, the empty tomb. We must see it." Who cares? He's not there! And this itself becomes a profound historical proof of the reality of their victory.

Now, they are interested in the cross but not the empty tomb because the cross, this dreaded instrument of terror in the Roman Empire, becomes the symbol of hope. It becomes the symbol of the victory over death and the symbol of love for the early church. And they scrawl it on walls. They put it in hidden riddles and signs as a sign of hope. It is to this day a sign of hope. Isn't that amazing? That seems so odd. It also becomes a proof. The proof is what they had as a result of the victory of Christ a freedom from fear. We know two things now because of Easter. We know, first of all, that Jesus Christ can keep his promises and the early Christians built upon the promises that he made. They decided to trust them. "Because I live, you will live also." That's the promise they decided to build on it. When Our Lord was dying on the cross, in the seven last words, one of those words was given by Our Lord to a man who is dying along side of him, a thief. And the thief said to him, "Teacher, Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And with just that one sentence from the thief, Jesus says to the thief "Amen, I say to you. Today thou shall be with me in paradise." I want to ask you a question. What do you do with that sentence? Is that just the sentence of a man trying to comfort another man? Or, can Jesus keep that promise? As a result of Easter, we know that he can keep that promise. It is not just a sentiment. It's a promise. It's rooted and grounded in his character. He can keep that promise. "Today thou shall be with me in paradise."

One of the other words from the cross our Lord said and it's the first word, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Can Jesus keep that promise? Can he make that forgiveness stick? Yes. And that becomes an amazing proof, the promises that our Lord made that the disciples decide to claim. And then finally, we discovered that Jesus knows how to find us. He's better at finding us than we are at finding him. And that becomes a proof, too. He's still doing it. He's still finding us. Maybe you came to church not looking for him, at all. Or, maybe in your life, in your own life journey, you're not looking for him, or maybe looking in the opposite direction. And then by surprise, the pieces of the puzzle come together. You discover his love, his grace, his promise, that the promises are also for you; also for me. And I make that discovery and realize that he's better at finding me than I

am at finding him. Heavenly Father, thank you for Easter. Thank you that because he lives, we will live also. Thank you that Christ has risen. He has risen indeed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Muggeridge, Malcolm. *Jesus Rediscovered*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1st edition (1969).

J.S. Bach, *Passion According to St. Matthew*, conducted by Gustave Leonhardt, Deutsche Harm Mundi, 2005.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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