

SLIDE 1

Recognizing Jesus
John 20:1-23
Easter, March 31, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church

If the risen Jesus were to walk into this sanctuary this very minute, what do you think he would look like? Would we recognize him? I don't know that we would. He is aware of current styles in men's clothing and haircuts, after all! And when he was raised from the dead, even his closest followers didn't recognize him immediately. Resurrection changes things! So what happened to the disciples, so that they could open their eyes?

That's what the last two chapters of the Gospel of John tell us. Today we will be reading from John, chapter 20, vv 1-23. Hear now the word of God from the gospel of John.

SLIDES 2- 20

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

When Mary Magdalene saw the risen Jesus, she mistook him for the gardener. And when Jesus’ disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, and Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you,” at first they didn’t recognize Jesus either. Apparently the risen Jesus resembled the Jesus they had known; and yet at the same time, he was different. Resurrection from the dead is not anything that any of us have seen or experienced. That’s because it’s a whole different dimension from the space-time dimensions in which we live.

So how were the eyes of Jesus’ followers opened? How did they come to recognize the risen Jesus for who he now is? They recognized him when he spoke.

Mary sees Jesus standing there, outside the tomb. And Jesus asks her why she is crying, and who she is looking for. She doesn’t yet recognize Jesus’ voice, which is odd. Someone’s appearance might change over time; but their voices don’t usually change that much, right? Like for instance, maybe you’ve been to a reunion and come across a guy who looked kind of familiar; but you weren’t really sure of who he was. Until he started talking! And then you recognized him – by his voice. We’ve probably all had experiences like that.

So why doesn’t Mary recognize Jesus’ voice when he says, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” It’s because she needed to hear Jesus speak her name, “Mary”, before she was able to accept that this man really was Jesus. After all, Mary had seen Jesus die; and the Romans were thorough when they executed someone. She had seen him dead, and seen him wrapped in cloth and myrrh and aloes. She had seen him buried. How could she accept that she was now seeing and hearing Jesus alive again, unless he proved it to her? A gardener wouldn’t have known her name. Jesus did. And he spoke her name as he always had, with love and with power. Then she recognized him and grabbed hold of him – her tears transformed into radiant joy.

What about the other disciples? Mary told them that she'd seen and heard and touched the risen Jesus. Yet they didn't take her seriously. That evening, they were gathered together behind locked doors, afraid that they too would be arrested and executed. And all of a sudden, Jesus is standing in their midst! The Bible doesn't tell us what their immediate reaction was. But it must not have been one of recognition, because Jesus speaks to them, AND shows them his hands and side, BEFORE they are overjoyed. Once they do recognize Jesus, they react with the same radiant, overwhelming joy that Mary did. And Jesus repeated what he'd said: "Peace be with you." Then Jesus tells them that he is sending them out. He breathes on them so that they can receive the Holy Spirit. And when they have received the Holy Spirit, they are granted the authority to forgive sins, or not.

When Jesus speaks Mary's name, she recognizes him and is filled with joy. When Jesus speaks to the disciples, and shows them his hands and sides, they recognize him and are filled with joy. But all of that was almost 2000 years ago. Is Jesus still alive? Yes, absolutely. Jesus is fully God as well as fully human; only so could he have been resurrected from the dead. God is not limited by time or by any other dimension, because he is infinite; and God raised Jesus; which means that Jesus lives forever. Well, if he's still alive, is he still with us? Oh yes! By the power of the Holy Spirit, yes, he is very much still with us! He was with us in the past, he is with us right now, he will be with us forever. There are no limits to what Jesus can do, praise be to God!

But how do we recognize him? Mary, the disciples, hundreds of people at once, all saw the resurrected Jesus within the first 40 days after Easter. Well, we didn't. We can't see what they saw, because his physically resurrected body ascended into heaven 40 days after Easter. Sometimes folks have visions of Jesus; but seeing Jesus in a vision is not the same thing as physically seeing him. Physically, there's nothing for us to see. And besides, when Jesus did physically live on this earth, he looked pretty much the same as all the other Galilean Jewish men. We know that because the New Testament authors don't comment about Jesus' appearance – which they would have if there had been something noteworthy, like bright red hair or a twisted foot. So even if we were to see him, how would we recognize him?

Well, again, how did Mary recognize Jesus? By hearing him speak to her. How did the disciples recognize Jesus? By hearing him speak to them. So how do you think we might recognize Jesus? By hearing him speak to us. And how would we do that? Well, sometimes Jesus speaks directly into our souls by the work of the Holy Spirit. But usually Jesus speaks to us through Scripture by the work of the Holy Spirit.

For example: I have a quotation from Isaiah 41 on my desk. That's because some years ago, when I was pastor of the Church of the 49ers in Columbia, I was going through a rough patch – as happens to all of us from time to time. Well, I was reading through Isaiah 41, and wondering if I should be doing something else, and feeling mighty puny and sorry for myself – and a verse just jumped right off the page and smacked me in the head. So to speak! It certainly set me straight. Has something like that ever happened to you? Then I would say that that is Jesus, speaking to you through Scripture, by the work of the Holy Spirit. That's usually how we recognize the risen Jesus.

And risen he is! Mary saw him and heard him and felt him and smelled him. The disciples all saw and heard and felt and smelled him. Travelers on a road saw and heard him and poured out their hearts to him. Paul tells us that Jesus' brother James saw him, and so did more than 500 disciples, who all saw the risen Jesus at the same time. I think that's enough witnesses to say, yes, it really happened, don't you? And though we don't see him now, he is with us. Jesus comforts us, calls us, confronts us, and draws us further into communion with him. We recognize him when we hear him speak, usually through Scripture.

What do you think our proper response for all of that love should be? How about, THANK YOU? Let's pray.

Thank you, O God of majesty, for sending Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, to us. Thank you that he came with healing in his touch, though he was wounded for our sins. Thank you that he came with mercy in his voice, though he was mocked as one despised. Thank you that he came with peace in his heart, though he met with violence and death. Thank you that by your power, he broke free from the prison of the tomb, and at his command the very gates of hell were opened. Thank you that the one who was dead now lives, and will always live. Thank you that the one who humbled himself is raised to rule over all creation. Thank you that the one ascended on high is with us always, as he promised. Thank you that we can recognize him and learn from him through the word he speaks to us. May our lives be signs of his life; and may all we have show forth his love. Praise, glory, and thanksgiving be to you, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.