

2 Epiphany January 15, 2023
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Where is Jesus
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Early in the morning, before sunrise, Mary went to the cemetery, the one in a garden where only a few days before the dead body of Jesus had been placed. But when she came to the tomb, she saw the stone that sealed the tomb shut had been rolled away.

For her, the open door caused anxiety that can be summed up in one question: Where was Jesus? She ran to the other disciples who were not able to answer the question. So, she wept at the open door. The appearance of angels did not help. They would not tell her where Jesus was.

Then she heard someone behind her ask why she was weeping. She told him, she didn't know where Jesus was. He asked her the question: who are looking for? But – possibly because Mary had not been there when John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God from today's Gospel lesson, and didn't hear his question (which was too similar to be a coincidence) to the disciples' question: what are you looking for? she didn't recognize what the author of John's Gospel is hoping those of us reading the Gospel today will recognize: This is what Jesus had been inviting his followers to come and see when they asked Jesus where he was staying. We might think of this question as a literal one, expecting an answer that is the ancient equivalent of a street address we can program into a GPS that will take us to a physical location. But that is not what the author of John's Gospel intended with the question of where Jesus was staying. That question is theological and points to Jesus' identity, not a street address. And because it is theological, both questions of what and who will be answered in one.

John's Gospel – and all the gospels – are not historical documents, adventure stories, novels, nor murder mysteries. All the gospels are a type of theological reflection on who Jesus is and what that means. So, sometimes, especially in John's Gospel, we need to remember the end to understand the beginning.

When Jesus passed by John the Baptist (who is a different person than who is believed to have written John's Gospel) John the Baptist recognized Jesus is the Lamb of God. This is an important theological point. This lamb isn't a sacrificial lamb, like a scapegoat. The lamb the author of John's Gospel is comparing Jesus

to is the Passover lamb, the last meal the people of God ate before their long journey from slavery to freedom. The Passover lamb is symbolic of that transition to freedom; it is the nourishment that reminds them of God's sustaining presence and desire for God's people. Jesus as the Lamb of God is therefore the spiritual nourishment of a new kind of freedom God longs for all people: freedom from the evil of sin.

That is what the author of John's Gospel wanted us to recognize. So much so, it was stated in the very first chapter in the Gospel. Then, like the story of Exodus, we are taken on the journey of Jesus' ministry, his miracles, followers, encounters, and the conversations that are not verbatims but are again told through the lens of who Jesus is and what Jesus brings so we can learn to recognize God with us through all situations, transforming life into what God has always dreamed and longed for.

It is not always easy to recognize God present with us, even when we are trying to follow Jesus. Since tomorrow we will celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I recalled something he wrote in a sermon about a time he needed the reminder God was with him. Now that Dr. King is thought of as a hero, we often forget he was a person of faith who made mistakes, struggled, felt disappointment, despair and then found help or hope and kept going. Instead of making him weak or less, these are reasons why I admire him. Life was not easy for Dr. King. The more vocal and visible he became the more threats of violence he received. He recalled times when he answered his telephone only to hear someone threaten to burn his house down, to kill him and his family. Sometimes that made him feel guilty, especially when he thought about his children, who were babies at the time. When he marched, more threats were shouted. Sometimes there were sounds of gunfire and he couldn't stop himself from flinching.

During a time when he was feeling scared, he spoke at a meeting about the now famous Montgomery bus boycott. He confessed it wasn't his best speech because he was trying to project a strength and a confidence he wasn't feeling. After the meeting he was approached by a Black woman he called Mother Pollard. The title Mother was one of respect for her age, wisdom, and support. She was not a professional religious person like a nun or priest. Mother Pollard took Dr. King aside and asked what was wrong. "Are the white people getting to you?" she asked. "You know we are all with you, don't you? And if we aren't with you, then you know God is."

Dr. King said he often thought of her wisdom. It was a reminder that revitalized him any time he felt despair. She helped him see or recognize God was with him when he couldn't.

Of course, Mother Pollard didn't mean God was present in the physical body of Jesus like when Jesus was on the earth. She meant God is incarnate, or present through the Risen Christ who brings the Holy Spirit to empower us to live into that resurrection life that is freedom from the sins of the world, including the sins of racism, segregation, and keeping people in poverty that Dr. King fought against.

Like the Risen Christ revealed to Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel, the one we usually hear on Easter Sunday, no one can keep the Risen Christ in one place. Not even a tomb can hold him back. Instead, he is with us, like he was with Mary Magdalene. When she recognized the Risen Christ with her, he told her to tell those who had followed him, and she did. They told others, who told others and despite attempts to silence this good news by those frightened by it, and despite similar attempts to appropriate that good news by making it into that same stuff of sin Jesus took away, there are those who continue telling people to this day Christ is with us, bringing with him the chance to rid ourselves of sins like arrogance, elitism, greed, sexism, racism, agism, ablism, homophobia, transphobia and all the other forms sin can take.

We are free to live into the resurrection life of Christ, even though not everyone will understand or accept it. People like Dr. King show us there are those who will fight it, even take up violence in vain attempts silence it. But, like Jesus himself, resurrection life can't be locked away and forgotten. It can't even be killed. There is no place or person on this earth who can prevent Christ and resurrection life from being with us.

We might not always be able to see it. We all can get discouraged from time to time. That is why we need each other. To support each other, to be there for each other, even when we disagree. To be kind. To be creative. To laugh together. To be honest with each other. To pray together. And always to remind each other no matter what happens, we do know where Jesus is because we know who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God, the Lamb of God and Jesus is right here, with us, through the resurrection, just like he invited his followers and continues to invite us all, like Mary Magdalene, to see.