

Has Anyone Seen Jesus Lately?

Encountering the resurrected Lord in the ordinary | GLEN V. WIBERG

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where

the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:1-18).

When Mary Magdalene came upon him in the dim light of dawn, the farthest thing from her mind was resurrection. She

came looking for a dead Jesus not a living Lord. It was grief rolling over her like the ebb and flow of an ocean tide; grief that made the inside of the tomb seem as empty as a drum; grief that even in death they could not let him be, and the rumor that someone had stolen his body.

But then when a human voice asks the reason for her tears, she turns around and sees a shadowy figure. How the storyteller describes it is striking: *Supposing him to be the gardener.* The caretaker of the grounds in work clothes, of all things, the one who does the chores of cleaning up. “The red marks on his hands are where he is holding roses,” says my friend Frederick Buechner. “The trouble he is having with his feet comes from miles of patrolling the grounds to pick up gum wrappers with a pointed stick.”

We could say, of course, that Mary’s failure to recognize him was due to the dim half-light of dawn when it is hard to see things clearly. Some of us have known those in-between times in our lives of darkness and light. Or perhaps she failed to recognize him because of her weeping, that it was her tears that kept her from recognizing him. Others of us



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know how grief can blur one's vision.

But in fact it was neither. This is how the resurrected Lord appeared and still appears—not in naked majesty with halo and trumpet blast, nor in trailing clouds of glory, but in, with, and under the ordinary. Most often he appears in the things, the people, the routines closest at hand; whether it's picking up gum wrappers or doing dishes or washing clothes or preparing meals or driving to work and back again. In the ordinary there is the presence of the Holy, the Resurrection, and the Life.

Supposing him to be the gardener.

Check it out for yourself. Read the stories of his appearances and you

will discover all four Gospels saying much the same thing. Jesus is known in the common things—the breaking of bread, eating fish, a seven-mile hike, telling his friends where the fish are biting, preparing breakfast on the shore, meeting behind closed doors, and fresh wounds. “The Word was made flesh,” John says. The resurrection doesn't renege on that one bit. *Flesh*. The mystery of the ordinary.

But how does one learn to see him in what is most familiar—closest at hand? “Whence comes that double magic of recognizing the ordinary as extraordinary and the extraordinary as ordinary?” asks Belden Lane.

Why not start with where you are right now—springtime after a long, hard winter? The daffodils are up, the Canadian geese nesting, and the crocuses blooming. As Martin Luther wrote, “Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.” Or as the Appalachian farmer Caleb Peaslee writes in his almanac: “This time of the year I never see a bud on an ash, I never hear a frog croak on the edge of the swamp after supper. I never cut

Glen V. Wiberg is pastor emeritus of Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, Minnesota, and author of *Housing the Sacred* (Covenant Publications, 2009).

a maple switch and see the sap foller the axe without wonderin' why folks hanker after miracles when they c'n watch the comin' of spring and think nothin' of it."

The author of the ancient Gospel of Thomas (one of those early books that never made it into the New Testament but that are nevertheless valuable), knowing the ordinary to be full of wonder, provides a clue: "Split the stick and there is Jesus; lift the stone and one finds the Lord." But now in the light of Easter, the commonest things are not less but more.

Orthodox Easter liturgies celebrate it better than most of us do. "Now all things are filled with light, heaven and earth and all places under the earth. All creation doth celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Rejoice, O creation, and bloom like a lily! For Christ as God has risen from the dead. As God thou didst arise from the grave in glory, and with thee didst raise the world."

Supposing him to be the gardener.

And why not? To be alive and part of this changing, fascinating universe is to be filled with a kind of wild joy in touching what lies at the center of everything, which, as St. Paul says, holds everything together, namely, Christ.

Further, why not attend to who you are right now, and perhaps the most ordinary thing of all—your own name?

I can't think of any greater, more suspenseful dialogue in all literature than in our Easter gospel today. The One who walks the garden path takes up the question of the two angels at the tomb: *Woman, why are you weeping?* And while the word *woman* is filled with dignity and respect, still it is generic and calls forth no recognition. Not until he says, *Mary*, and then turning, lost in wonder, love, and praise, she sees the Lord and all she can say is *Rabbouni*, Teacher.

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Ordinary talk. An ordinary name. But then let any child, or grandchild, or loved one, or friend, or grieving person hear one's own name spoken, not in any kind of demand, or shame, or reproach or guilt, but held gently as the beloved with only worth attached: Mary, Adam, Elizabeth. And lo, recognition breaks forth in streams of radiant light.

How much more when we hear the risen One calling our name in Holy Baptism: "I have called you by name and you are mine." Or when by his wounds with the red marks on his hand we are named at the Holy Supper: "The body broken for you, Mary, for you, Adam, for you, Elizabeth." And, "The blood shed for you, John, for you, Peter, for you, Kristen."

More than anything else on this Easter morning, in this garden place among the ordinary, and in the words of this ordinary preacher, I wish you might hear Jesus calling your name and so in meeting him again as for the first time, you discover your own worth, and how much you are loved by him, and forgiven, and offered a fresh start.

The Master is here and is calling for you. The mystery of the ordinary.

Supposing him to be the gardener.

The story provides one more clue for seeing Jesus in the ordinary. Attend to the circle of those who are his friends, his sisters and

brothers.

I find it significant that seeing Jesus came about as a result of observing the rituals, the Sabbath, the preparing of spices, the prayers, and then the return on Sunday, expecting nothing but to weep and pay respects—the mystery of the ordinary. But then in the moment of recognition Jesus directs Mary back to the circle of friends: Don't cling to me as you once did. Let go of the past but go and tell the others. Tell them that life can be found by giving it away. Tell them only what has been true for you, what you have seen and heard. There you will see me.

In becoming what Luther called "little Christs" to each other by wearing the mask of the ordinary, we discover in each other the presence of more than what appears on the surface. And in reaching out to others we find Jesus. It's not by accident that John Wesley called the church "the ordinary means of grace," God choosing the ordinary people like you and me, not many wise by human standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth but showing himself in parties and meals, in washings and in the serving of the least of his sisters and brothers.

Has anyone seen Jesus lately? Or having seen him as a child or youth or in the passing of the years, is there a longing to see him again as if for the first time? The risen One is closer than you think, masked in the ordinary, in this springtime of creation, in the calling of your name, but not least of all in those sitting beside you in worship, and on the streets where you live, and not forgetting your sisters and brothers in Haiti and Chile. He is here and present for each of us.

As we sing in the Easter hymn: "Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom."

Split the stick and there is Jesus; lift the stone and one finds the Lord. ■