

To See and Believe

Easter Day, 21 April 2019. [Isaiah 65:17-25](#); [I Corinthians 15:19-26](#), [John 20:1-18](#).

Monday was a rough day this week. I could not believe I was watching Notre Dame Cathedral burn. It took nearly 200 years to build. It survived the Protestant Reformation, two world wars, and centuries of neglect. Just when this graceful Gothic building was finally getting some long overdue maintenance, an accident left it in worse shape than before. I could not believe this happened on our watch.

Granted, a burning building was not as horrifying as the massacres at the mosques in Christ Church or at Tree of Life Synagogue. It was not as devastating as the tornadoes that swept through this region just a few weeks ago. One firefighter was injured in the blaze, but thankfully, no one was killed. And many pointed out on social media that three African American church buildings in Louisiana had burned over the past ten days, likely due to arson, and no one at the time was talking about that.

But still the world mourned. People hovered by TVs and on Twitter. All over the world, there were gasps as the spire fell. As the day went on, it was hard to separate speculation from reality. I read any number of horrors. Three rose windows had exploded in the heat. One of the towers had fallen, and with it the great bells. The organ was a total loss. The Crown of Thorns relic was damaged. Worse, some were saying terrorism was to blame, though there was no evidence of that at all.

This is the climate of the first Easter. That morning dawned with the same sense of grief and panic that accompanies any disaster. You hear it in the story. Mary had gone to the tomb to prepare the body of Jesus for burial, which was bad enough. When she got there, his body was gone, and the rumors began to fly. Mary assumed foul play and ran to tell others. You get the sense that Mary talked to folks along the way, and they confirmed her fears of a conspiracy. The first word on Easter morning was a news flash of tragedy – “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have taken him.”

As the rumors grew, Peter and an unnamed disciple ran to check it out for themselves. Peter was fast. The other disciple was faster. When he got there, he peeked, but he didn't enter the tomb. Peter finally arrived and went inside, but he appears not to have grasped what was going on. Finally, the other disciple went in. “And he saw and believed.”

They call him the Beloved Disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. He shows up several times in John's gospel, but not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In John's gospel, he asked a question at the Last Supper. He was present at the crucifixion. From the cross, Jesus asked this disciple to take care of his mother. He raced Peter to the empty tomb, as we just read. He also saw the risen Jesus on the Sea of Galilee after Easter. And near the end of the gospel, John 21:24 reads, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.” In other words, the Beloved Disciple wrote the book.

Other than that, he is a mystery. Though he is never named in the gospel, the oldest idea is that he was John the Disciple, as in James and John, one of the brothers Jesus called Sons of Thunder, who were always jockeying for position. Some think it was John the Elder who wrote the letters of John in the New Testament, or maybe John of Patmos who wrote the Revelation to John. Or maybe all of those people were one and the same.

But there are other ideas. Some think the Beloved Disciple may have been Lazarus, the one Jesus raised from the dead. After all, Jesus clearly loved him. Some have written that he was James the Less, often thought to be the brother of Jesus.

And then there's the *Da Vinci Code*. A few folks out there do speculate that the Beloved Disciple was Mary Magdalene. Dan Brown took the idea a little farther for dramatic effect. He said the Beloved Disciple was Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus was secretly married and who gave birth to Jesus's child who was hidden away in Britain and somehow became the Holy Grail. But that's way out there.

So, we don't know who he - or she - was. But what is clear in John's gospel is that the Beloved Disciple was on to something. Mary believed when she saw the risen Jesus and he called her name. The other disciples believed when Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors on Easter evening. We will read next week about our beloved St. Thomas who did not believe until he saw Jesus in person and touched his hands and side.

But for this disciple, the Beloved Disciple, the empty wrappings were enough. He saw and believed. He believed even before he saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes. Despite the conspiracy theories circling and the fears of tragedy and grief of the moment, he believed something bigger was going on. He didn't understand it all. He didn't understand the scriptures or what Jesus had said about rising from the dead. He may not have had the full picture, but he believed God was at work. He saw and believed.

Believe is a big word in John's gospel. The word occurs a little over two hundred fifty times in the whole New Testament. One hundred of those times are in John. The word in Greek means more than just intellectual assent. It has to do with confidence and trust and commitment. The Beloved Disciple at the empty tomb saw what everyone else saw. But rather than panic, he trusted and had confidence in God. He saw and believed.

The morning after the fire, as pictures from inside Notre Dame started showing up on the news feed, I could hardly believe my eyes. Part of the stone vaulting had collapsed under the spire, but otherwise it was intact. The area around the altar was a little messy but basically fine. The rose windows were not destroyed. Reports are the organ can be restored. A human chain saved much of the artwork and relics. Fire fighter heroes braved flames to save the towers. What seemed like a twenty- or thirty-year restoration project on Monday was looking more like a five- to ten-year project on Tuesday. Donations are pouring in to rebuild. When it is rebuilt, it will surely have more safety features in place. The tragedy that threatened to destroy the place may in fact save it. And let us hope the controversy about whether donations should go to rebuild a building or rebuild the lives of people who are struggling will lead to recognition that it is possible to do both.

And I remembered the news that came out of Beauregard and Talbotton after the tornadoes. The loss of life in Beauregard was horrific. Nothing will replace these precious people. I do not want to minimize that. But it is absolutely amazing so many survived. Nearly 100 people hid out at Providence Baptist Church. The Church had built a storm shelter a few years ago and it saved lives. The weekend after the storm, I went to Talbotton to help with clean-up, and I was amazed there were not more serious injuries there.

And likewise, after the tragedy in Christ Church, the government of New Zealand acted immediately to embrace the Muslim community and work toward greater gun safety. After the horror at Tree of Life, people reached out to the Jewish community with so much love. Within just a few days, over \$1.8 million was raised to rebuild the churches in Louisiana. As we usually do after a tragedy, the human community came together with overwhelming love and care.

This should not surprise us, for in the tragedies and losses of our lives we often receive new life where we least expect it. We find our way through a grief we think we will not be able to bear. We learn a hard lesson we did

not welcome and become better for it. We come together in a tragedy and learn to lean on one another a little more. That which does not kill us does actually make us stronger.

This is the good news of Easter, my friends. It would be nice to live in a world where tornadoes do not happen and massacres do not occur and illness is always cured and churches do not burn for any reason and everyone has what they need. We wish for a world that welcomes the good news of Jesus rather than crucify him. The witness of the scriptures is that God is wishing for this kind of world as well, but people get in the way. So we're not there yet. We will never get there, until God's kingdom comes in its fullness in some magnificent way.

But the promise of Easter is that God's new life is always breaking in wherever it can. Like water seeping into the crevices it spreads and grows wherever there is an opportunity. Our work is to be a human chain cooperating with divine goodness every way we can.

The Beloved Disciple tapped into that kind of confidence on that Easter morning. I think it helped that he paused a bit outside the tomb rather than react and rush in. He paused to consider what God might be doing in that moment. He did not panic or give in to fear. He saw and believed.

We do not know the disciple's name, maybe because the gospel writer was trying to be modest. But maybe, just maybe, the name was omitted as an invitation. Maybe the point the writer was making was that we can all be like this unnamed disciple – to look at the empty wrappings of death and have confidence that sometimes miraculous is going on, that God will do something we cannot yet imagine to heal and restore and save. To see and believe. Alleluia, Christ is Risen.

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