

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on April 15, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EASTER SUNDAY

JOHN 20:3-8

“So, Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen clothes lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived, and he went into the tomb. He saw the linen clothes lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside, and he saw and believed.”

DAWN PATROL

It is probably true to say that we only see what we are looking for. Take an artist, a geologist, and a farmer, and have them look at a certain piece of countryside. Ask them what they see, and then listen to the varied answers they will give to your question. The artist will see a landscape. He will remark upon the scenery, the contour of the land, the light and shade in the colorings of earth and sky. In a word, he will see the subject for a painting. The geologist, on the other hand, will pay particular attention to the rock formations. He will try to discover whether the prevailing structure of the earth’s crust in that area is shale, or granite, or limestone. He will see the countryside through the eyes of the scientist. And the farmer, of course, will look upon the land as a means of earning a livelihood. He will examine the soil, to determine its quality, whether it is good for growing crops or grazing cattle. Three men have looked at the same countryside, and yet they have not seen the same things. So, we must always bear in mind just what we mean whenever we say, “I saw.” It may range from a mere cursory glance to a comprehensive understanding look.

Benjamin Franklin was a brilliant man, but he apparently knew little about art. He once visited the Louvre in Paris, where, as you know, some of the world’s masterpieces of painting are displayed. Coming away, he confessed to a friend that he had never before seen such a fine collection of frames!

“Two men looked out through prison bars,
One saw mud, the other stars.”

While He was here on earth, different people looked at Jesus, but they didn’t all see the same thing. Thomas saw One Whom he addressed as “My Lord and my God!” But others saw in the same Jesus only “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34).

Now, in these verses of our text, we are told what Peter and John saw at the sepulchre on the first Easter morning. When we examine the original Greek of the passage, we discover that

three entirely different verbs are used, all of which are translated into English by the word “see.” Three times in these verses we find the words “he saw” - but they are three different and distinctive verbs in the original, suggesting that there are three varieties of vision.

1. Verse 5. John won the race to the sepulchre, possibly because he was a younger and more agile man than Peter. The first thing he noticed was that the great stone had been rolled back from the mouth of the tomb, and this produced a creepy feeling that certainly made him completely disinclined to enter the gloomy cave alone! He simply stooped down, and literally peeped in. He didn't go in -- he merely peeped in. He saw the linen clothes lying. That was probably as much as he had time to see before Peter, puffing and panting from the exertion of running, joined him. We read that John “saw,” but we should bear in mind that a more accurate translation would be that John had a peep, a glance into the tomb. And if John's peep into the tomb were all the evidence we had for the fact of the resurrection, then it would be evidence of a very flimsy nature indeed.

Yet, John's action is very like the attitude of a good many people today toward religion. They take a peep at it, and on the basis of that peep they proceed and presume to argue against it. Perhaps when they were young they received little or no Christian training in the home, and their infrequent visits to Church and Sunday School gave them but a superficial smattering of religious knowledge, and now they want to have nothing to do with it. Or again, they know someone who holds a responsible position in the church, but who is also an untrustworthy person in the world of business. Or it may be that they were slandered or misrepresented by a church member who loved to gossip. And so, through this little peephole of some unworthy Christian, the decision is taken to have nothing to do with Christianity.

Mahatma Gandhi, of honored memory, as a young man, was refused admission to a Christian church one Sunday evening in South Africa. He was told that a church for “colored” people was farther down the road. He never again attempted to enter a Christian place of worship, although to the end of his life he had a great admiration for the Person of our Lord, and his favorite hymn was, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” But what a tragedy that he only looked at Christianity through the dirty peephole of a segregated congregation!

One discovers that many people who are otherwise well-educated, are extremely ill-informed when it comes to the Christian faith. I have known many militant agnostics who have had the most childish and indeed naive notions about Christianity. And in almost every case it has been due to the fact that they have never spent the time or made the effort necessary to really acquaint themselves with the fundamentals of the faith. Their knowledge of the Bible has been virtually nil, and one cannot escape the conclusion that if they would only apply themselves as seriously to the study of the Christian faith as they do to the study of psychology or the physical or social sciences, their attitude toward the faith would be vastly different. Their trouble and tragedy is that they have only taken a peep at Christianity.

John peeped into the tomb.

2. Verse 6. Peter was not satisfied with what John had seen. It was insufficient for him, and besides, it was secondhand evidence. So Peter, utterly fearless, strode right into the tomb, and his

daring was rewarded, for he thus had a much fuller view of what had taken place than had John. He was in a much better position to assess what had really happened. There was a world of difference between being inside and outside the tomb that Easter morning.

Have you ever looked up at the stained-glass windows of a great cathedral before you entered it? From the outside they look drab, commonplace, uninteresting. But viewed from the inside, with sunlight streaming through them -- what a transformation! It is only from the inside that the radiance and the beauty and the glory are revealed.

So it was with Peter. He saw from the inside more than John saw from the outside. Peter noticed that the burial cloth which had bound the Savior's head, was folded up by itself, instead of lying beside the linen shroud. Peter's looking and seeing were more careful, more vivid, more instructive. But what I want you to notice is this: the word associated with Peter's seeing really means — "to be a mere spectator." Peter's position was certainly better than John's had been, but for all that, he was nothing more than a spectator. Whatever had happened or was happening, he was entirely outside of it all. He didn't understand its inner meaning or significance. The miracle of the resurrection had simply not registered in his mind and heart. He was only a spectator.

Americans are far and away the most church-going folk in the world. Why then is the spiritual life of the nation at such a low ebb? The reason in part at least lies in the fact that many people whose names are on the membership roll of churches across the country have never been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to grasp the essentials of the Gospel or to embrace Christ as personal Savior. Granted, they have the advantage of being on the "inside," so to speak, but for all that, the central things of the faith have passed them by, because they have never been "born again." Christmas and Easter, and even the sacraments of the Church, are for them simply spectacles which they observe; but they remain detached from them, unable to comprehend their inner meaning.

Thank God we do not have friction in our church because we all know Christ and are one in Him. But when disputes arise in a church they are invariably fomented by these "spectators"; because, you know, one of the characteristics of the spectator is that he is trigger-happy when it comes to the matter of criticism. He loves to sit in the stands and holler at the players. You know how he jumps to his feet, shakes his fist, and gives vent to loud-mouthed abuse when the ball carrier fumbles at the line of scrimmage, or the kicker misses a field goal, or the quarterback throws an interception! The spectator would never commit errors like that!

The minister of a 3,000-member church told me once that one-quarter of his membership does the work, and the other three-quarters sit back and criticize! He was frustrated and a bit cynical, and I'm sure he was exaggerating somewhat; nevertheless, we must ever be vigilant lest we lapse into the "spectator attitude." It is so much easier to criticize the person who is trying to do a job of work in the church than to take your coat off and get to work yourself! The Church of Christ today cannot afford the luxury of spectators. Her members must be "up and at it." They all have a part to play and a contribution to make; and we must see to it that every one of them becomes involved. in some form of ministry.

When an old English stagecoach came to a steep hill, it was the accepted rule that first-

class passengers should sit still, that second-class passengers should get out and walk, and that third-class passengers should get out and push! Believe me, the Church needs only third-class passengers, and she needs them as never before. Let us never live as if we were on the wrong side of Easter, as if we were still in the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter morning. Easter Day has dawned, and God help us if we are only spectators of that transforming event!

3. Verse 8. No doubt John's courage speedily returned. At any rate, he felt emboldened to enter the tomb himself, and we read that "he saw and believed"; or, as Dr. Moffatt translates it, "when he saw for himself, he was convinced." There we have the verb "to see" in all its fullness and power. This was no mere peep or glance, no inspection devoid of insight. This was a full-orbed vision -- "he saw for himself"; that is to say, he perceived, he understood, he comprehended what it meant. So, John saw not only the empty tomb, he saw the significance of it all. This tomb had not been rifled; the orderly display of the clothes was proof of that. This was not the scene of a raid, but the story of a resurrection.

Some of us, perhaps, have been content with a casual glance, a peep at Christ; others have been mere spectators. But if we are to be Christians in the true New Testament sense of the term, we have got to get nearer to the heart of things. Like John, we need to see the empty tomb with our eyes wide open, so that the inner meaning of it may not escape us.

We must ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, to reveal to us the full significance of the Resurrection of our Lord. The inner meaning, of course, is this -- that not only has the love and power of God conquered sin and death, but that Power is available to all who repent of their sins and accept Christ as personal Savior and Lord. If we would really be saved, we must forsake the spectator's seat, and become a partaker, a sharer in the drama and the dynamic of the resurrection.

When Dr. Billy Graham was conducting an evangelistic crusade at Harringay Arena in London, England, two men entered the arena one evening, sat down beside each other, and began to chat. They were strangers, but they soon agreed that this type of religion was sheer emotionalism, frothy, irrelevant and unreal. They had come mainly to see how people could so easily be "taken in" by an American preacher who was amply endowed with that mystical quality called "charisma." But as the service got underway, they ceased to stare around them, and began to concentrate upon the joyous singing and the atmosphere of worship. By the time Dr. Graham began to preach, they were prepared to give him an honest hearing; and then, as the Word of God was proclaimed with sincerity and power, the message really got through to them, and the Spirit of God convicted them of their need of a Savior. When those desiring to receive Christ were invited to come forward and meet with Dr. Graham, the one man said to the other, "I'm going forward; what about you?" "I will go with you," was the immediate reply. And later, in the anteroom, as they rose from their knees after asking Christ to save them from their sins, the one man turned to the other, and handing him a wallet, said this: "I am one of the most notorious pickpockets in London. As we sat there in the arena before the service began tonight, I took your wallet out of your hip pocket. Here it is, and I assure you that by the grace of God, it is the last thing I shall ever steal, for Jesus has saved me, and I want to live for Him."

When Jesus rose from the dead, and later ascended into Heaven, the only dwelling place

He had on earth was in the hearts of those who love Him, and yield to His claims upon them. If you profess to be His disciple, then others must be able to see, by the way you live, that Christ is indeed risen, and that He is living in you.

My prayer for you is that having faced the claims of Christ upon your life, having realized your need of Him, and having responded to that “love divine, all loves excelling,” you may indeed know “the power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3:10), and so be able to sing with Charles Wesley:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray --
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

AMEN.