

It's funny how things go sometimes. I had it all set — I had this most excellent Easter sermon from somewhere around 2011— and though I rarely repeat a sermon I figured it was a marvelous occasion, given that My long-time friend Sally was coming in town and I wanted a bit of time to relax with her — and really, after a couple of decades of preaching Easter, what more can I say — what more need I say? Alas, the few sermons that I have printed out and stashed in a box in the attic have vanished. Completely vanished. It was a crisis. It was a crisis because Easter leaves me speechless with joy, with wonder, with the mystery. It was a crisis because I cannot explain it, but I know deep down in my gut that it's true, not in a logical expository way, but in a gut wrenching, "Oh my God, what do I do with this piece of information? kind of way," and that all I really want to do is sit down, shut up and weep with gratitude for the reality of what this means and for what God has done.

Christ is Risen! What more needs to be said? As it turns out, a lot. As joyful as this wonderful affirmation of our faith is, it lacks something. As I reflect on it, it lacks quite a lot. So much so that I think we need to edit and amend our Easter proclamation so that it more closely matches the witness of the early Church—at least as the Gospel of John portrays it—and quote Mary Magdalene directly. Because after encountering Jesus in the garden that morning, after hearing his voice call her name, after recognizing who is before her, she does not rush back to proclaim that the Lord is risen. No. Breathless she says, "I have seen the Lord!" And when the disciples finally do meet the risen Lord a week later, do they tell Thomas that the Lord is Risen? No. They say, "We have seen the Lord!"

Whatever they have heard from angels or from others, the witness of the church is not "Christ is risen!" but "Amen! Amen! We have seen the Lord!"

Without that witness we have precious little.

I came to faith through the witness of saints. Not just the witness of the Bible but of people who stopped to tell me where they had seen the Lord. Powerful witnesses — witnesses like Corrie Ten Boom who saw the Lord in the death camps of Nazi Germany, and of Bishop Eustace Kaminyere of Uganda who told of seeing the risen Lord in the midst of the turbulent rule of Idi Amin who sent hundreds—if not thousands--of people who opposed him to their deaths. I came to faith through the witness of faithful people who told me both their doubts and their certainty — the Lord is here — I have seen him! I came to faith through the witness of people who walked with me through dark and confused times assuring me with both their words and actions that Christ would show up and that I would see his presence at work in my life.

That is what I am here to tell you today. I have seen the Lord in my life in more ways than I can count. When I have been dazed and confused by grief: I have seen the Lord! When my life was in shambles from which I thought there was no return: I have seen the Lord! When I have done things for which I thought I could never be forgiven: I have seen the Lord! When I was scared and alone: Amen! Amen! I have seen the Lord!

No. He did not appear to me with scarred hands and feet, and I did not see his pierced side. But I know his presence and I know his love — I have seen and felt it, despite the fact that there have been times when my heart was shut and locked tighter than any room the disciples thought of hiding out in.

What's more, I have seen the Lord in the world. I have seen the Lord when hope breaks out shining, when people respond in unexpected ways to tragedy, and when people keep speaking the truth — inconvenient though it sometimes is. I have seen the Lord in love, and I have seen the Lord in service, and I have seen the Lord walking in times of great pain and sorrow. Amen! Amen! I have seen the Lord!

I have also seen the Lord in you. I have seen the Lord in the discomfort of change and in the willingness to try. I have seen it in patience and laughter and struggling to understand. I have seen the Lord when you witnessed to your struggles in faith and in your joys. I have seen the Lord in steadfast love for each other, and in your yearning to help people in the world at the food Pantry and at NEST; I have seen the Lord at VBS and Sunday School. I have seen the Lord. I have seen the Lord in shared meals and shared worship. I have seen the Lord in hospitals and at gravesides. I have seen the Lord as you told your stories of where you have seen the Lord. Amen! Amen! I have seen the Lord!

This is the essential witness of the Church. While the fact that he is risen is important — what the world needs to know is that it makes a difference — it is the encounter with the Risen Lord that changes us. Freeing us from fear, freeing us from despair, freeing us from the tyranny of self, freeing us from the powers of sin and death. Freeing us to live in the abundance of God's love for us in hope and joy and in peace, in service and in love for those around us and the world.

We have seen the Lord and it makes all the difference. Having seen the Lord, we look for him again around every corner and in every interaction. Having seen the Lord, we know that we can persevere despite setbacks and even failure. Having seen the Lord, we can risk everything for God's work in the world, because we have nothing to lose — only life and love to gain. Having seen the Lord, we invite others to come and see and to share with them where they have seen the Lord.

Amen! Amen! I have seen the Lord! Where have you seen the Lord in your lives, in the world and in each other? How has that changed and freed you? This is the essential Christian witness. Amen! Amen! We have seen the Lord! This is the message the world is dying to hear. This is the message we live for. To whom, then, shall we go? With whom, then, shall we share it?