

Look at God

John 20:1-18

Easter, April 4, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Matt Matthews

The LORD has risen.
The LORD has risen, indeed.

Alleluia!

* * *

Tracy Dace is the founder and director of DREAAM: Driven to Reach Excellence in Academic Achievement for Males. Whenever DREAAM gets good press, people point to Tracy. “Tracy has done such great work. Tracy is such a compassionate person. Tracy is a visionary. Tracy is a man of God. Tracy loves kids. Tracy is making a real difference.” Tracy this, Tracy that. Everybody—including me—heaps praise onto Tracy.

Tracy *has* done great things. He has helped this congregation, indeed, our denomination, direct some of its mission energies and mission dollars to use for an incredible cause. When a kid gets called to the school office, they often don’t want to make that first call home to Mom or Dad; they want the principal to call Mr. Tracy. We celebrate what’s happening under Tracy’s direction and some of us point to him and say, “Look at Tracy Dace.”

I know for a fact that Tracy appreciates those accolades, but he quickly redirects them. Tracy points up and says, “Look at God.” It’s his way of saying, *Look at what God has done and is doing.*

Look at God.

Look at what God has done for me. Look at what God has done for DREAAM. Look at how God is moving through these DREAAM families bringing healing, bringing resources, bringing hope. Look at how God allows DREAAM House to come along side boys who could use a little extra support with afterschool direction, help with homework. Look at how God is using DREAAM House to stimulate vocational curiosity and to provide a circle of intense support and camaraderie among young people. Look at how God, through DREAAM House, is disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline that preys upon black boys. Look at how God stokes the fires of self-esteem, curiosity, and learning. Look at how God is softening the hearts of givers whose financial gifts make this ministry possible. Look at how God is bringing it all together.

When Tracy says, “Look at God,” he is asking a rhetorical question: Do you think this is my work? Do you think I am responsible.? Think again. The walls of DREAAM House aren’t being made by human hands.

Look at God.

* * *

The Easter story invites us to stop and look at God. Look at what God has done. Look at what God is doing. Look at what God has begun.

This last week has been a disaster. Jesus has been misunderstood. What began as a fun parade had ended in a graveyard. People lifted up palms on Sunday and cried out Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. On Friday, people lifted up him, on a cross, and taunted him. *If he's the son of God let him come down from that cross.* Jesus has threatened the Jewish, Roman, and Presbyterian powers. The establishment is angry, insecure, and reactionary.

It's been a bad week.

One of Jesus' disciples betrays Jesus with—of all things—a kiss. Jesus' faithful, faithful, faithful followers have scattered. Their leader, Peter, the one whom Jesus called Cephas, meaning "The Rock", for it was upon Peter, the Rock, that Jesus was going to build his church—this Peter outright denies Jesus. *I'm not a follower of Jesus; I don't know who that man even is.*

A bad week.

The crucifixion. The death. Jesus is executed for telling the world about how God loves the world, and modeling for the world how the people of God must seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Jesus reminded his followers to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love neighbor as self. For this they—WE—had him executed. This hatred and fear isn't a Jewish problem. This isn't a Roman problem. This is a human problem. And this problem sunk the plans of God in Jesus Christ. What a terrible, divine miscalculation. God didn't know what God was up against.

A bad, bad week for the whole, wide world, and for all the host of heaven.

He suffered. He cried out to God, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" They gambled for his clothes. They mocked him. For a drink of water, they gave him vinegar, instead. He died.

Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple and member of the council, got permission from Pilate to retrieve Jesus' body from the cross, and he took it to a tomb. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, who knew Jesus and was considered by some a secret disciple, tagged along, sagging under the weight of 100-pounds of myrrh and aloe. But no amount of funereal preparation could redeem the broken promises and this dismal outcome, and no amount of perfume would cover the coming stench. They wrapped Jesus up, perhaps feeling guilty for having not done enough in their power to stop that execution, and they laid the body, so lifeless and so dead, in a tomb. Sabbath was coming on, and nightfall. They had to leave, and there was no reason to stay.

It had been an awful week punctuated by a terrifying end.

And everybody went home bone tired. The executioners went home diminished because killing people for your livelihood takes it out of you—ask any modern-day prison guard. The angry crowds went home, mission accomplished, but tired from the yelling and drama of it all; tired from carrying all of that rage and hate and vitriol. The disciples, watching incredulously from their hiding places, slinked back home having invested their last years in this losing cause. The women and others who grieved, grieved, grieved openly at the foot of the cross went home all cried-out, pulled through a knot-hole backwards (as my mother might say).

They went home at the end of this horrible week. I'm taking Dietrich Bonhoeffer out of context, and quoting him here. The poem is "Who Am I?" The crowds went home:

*Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.*

They went home.

It had been a very bad week.

* * *

And then these few tired, stricken women shuffle to the tomb early on Sunday morning and find it empty. Angels cloud their vision, asking a comical question, “Why are you weeping?” (An angel should know the answer to that question.) A gardener stumbles into the scene and asks Mary the same silly question, “Why are you weeping and who are you looking for?” And then that gardener—who is not a gardener at all, but Jesus—calls Mary by her name. And Mary instantly recognizes the sound of that voice and that kindly face as that her friend. RABBOUNI! she shouts.

Look at God!

Look what God has done. Look at how God knew what God was doing. Look at how God took that twisted week and bent it in the form of something glorious. Look at how God has taken death and brought new life. Look at how God in Christ redeems humanity, takes the very worst of what we have to offer and transcends it. Look at how God cracks the darkest night with a ray of light. Look at how God makes all the scripture line up, and then takes what is expected to unimaginable heights. Look at how God allows human sin, but does not allow human sin to have the final word. Hate doesn't have the final word. Desperation doesn't have the final word. Resignation doesn't have the final word. Suffering, grief, and pain do not have the final word. Death doesn't have the final word. *God does. God has the final word.*

Look at God.

Look at what God can do. Look at what God calls us to be. Look at the new life God has invited us into, a life of service, a life of sacrifice, a life of meaning, a life of hope and unspeakable joy. Look at who God has given us to lead the way. *The LORD is my shepherd, and I shall not want.*

Look at God.

Thanks be to God.

Praise God.

The LORD has risen.

The LORD has risen, indeed.

Alleluia!

* * *

John 20:1-18

1Early 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. 2So 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.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran

Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and 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. 13They 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." 14When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" 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." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus 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.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.