

I Have Seen the Lord
John 20:1-18
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In 2002 Bruce Springsteen released a song that included lyrics about Mary Magdalene and this encounter in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wrote:

I see you Mary in the garden
In the garden of a thousand sighs
There's holy pictures of our children
Dancin' in a sky filled with light
May I feel your arms around me
May I feel your blood mix with mine
A dream of life comes to me
Like a catfish dancin' on the end of the line

I'm not exactly sure what role the fishing image is supposed to play in the song. But these lyrics are part of a song entitled "The Rising," which was on the album of the same name. Here's what *Time* magazine had to say about the album:

On *The Rising*, his first album of new material in seven years, Springsteen is again writing about work, hope and American life as it is lived this very moment. *The Rising* is about Sept. 11, and it is the first significant piece of pop art to respond to the events of that day. Many of the songs are written from the perspective of working people whose lives and fates intersected with those hijacked planes. The songs are sad, but the sadness is almost always matched with optimism, promises of redemption and calls to spiritual arms. There is more rising on *The Rising* than in a month of church.

Throughout the album, the lyrics draw attention away from the darkness of that terrifying day and focus attention instead on the hope of a new future based upon the sacrifices of those who gave their lives to save others. The album prays that we can come together despite our differences, forge a union of fellowship and love, and together work to create new life.

The song "The Rising" opens with verses about the emergency responders who rushed into the burning building to save the lives of others. The "rising" is initially their climbing the stairs in darkness. And then the song turns at this moment when Mary is weeping the garden over the one who has died. Mary comes to a garden of sighs and there encounters her beloved Jesus and holds him in her arms and the despair begins to fade in the dream of life after she has seen and held the Lord. The song then concludes:

Sky of blackness and sorrow (a dream of life)
Sky of love, sky of tears (a dream of life)
Sky of glory and sadness (a dream of life)
Sky of mercy, sky of fear (a dream of life)
Sky of memory and shadow (a dream of life)
Your burnin' wind fills my arms tonight
Sky of longing and emptiness (a dream of life)
Sky of fullness, sky of blessed life (a dream of life)

Come on up for the rising
Come on up, lay your hands in mine
Come on up for the rising
Come on up for the rising tonight

Asked about the spirituality of the music, Springsteen claimed that a spiritual revival was necessary and that it had to be a communal experience. He said, "I think that fits in with the concept of our band as a group of witnesses. That's one of our functions. We're here to testify to what we have seen."

And what they had seen was not simply the death and darkness. They saw something else—rising, resurrection, an Easter moment.

The band was like Mary. In the garden she was transformed and ran to proclaim to Jesus' other followers "I have seen the Lord."

Way back in chapter one of the Gospel of John, the author proclaims that through Jesus life has come into being and "the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This true light is coming into the world so that we might receive the power to become the children of God.

And then over and over again the Gospel tells us stories about this Jesus. How he turned water into wine at a wedding party, revealing God's wish that we all enjoy abundance. How he broke down barriers that society had erected between people. How he healed the sick and caused the blind to see. How he forgave sins and challenged the rules that religious authorities had created. Even how he raised Lazarus from the dead.

And the drumbeats throughout these stories are life and light. Let's shine a light in the darkness to cast away fear. Let's affirm the joy and beauty of life in order to defeat the powers of death.

And in this stories, those who experience Jesus begin to believe. To believe in him, because in him they see revealed the life-giving purposes of God.

So, it should come as no surprise that death does not defeat him.

There is another drumbeat throughout this gospel--a dissonant drumbeat. Every time Jesus does something life-giving, it elicits a doubtful, angry, and finally violent response in the political and religious authorities. And so injustice, violence, and death do their worst—they take and beat him and crucify him and kill him. And that should have been the end of the story.

Good intentions and noble ideals defeated once again.

But the gospel tells us something else happened this time. The grave could not hold Jesus. Oh no. He entered into the very life of God, rising again. Theology professor Cameron Murchison put it this way, “the mercy and grace of God in Christ triumphs over all that would undo it.”

This is the foundational confession of our Christian faith. It is not easy to believe in resurrection. It is so much easier to see and believe in the darkness, the despair, and the death. It is so much more difficult to believe, contrary to much evidence, that goodness and truth and beauty and joy and life ultimately triumph. UCC minister Martin Copenhaver has written that this is a claim worthy of our faith precisely because it is big enough to contain our doubt. He wrote, “What we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.”

What we proclaim is that Jesus lived into and out of the life of God and by doing so, death could not contain him. We are invited to share in that same life. We are given the kind of life that abides forever and overcomes all its enemies because it is life located in the heart of God. Murchison writes that it is “new life in the endlessly creative life of God.”

Experiencing that new life changed Mary, and it changed the other disciples as well. Mary ends her grieving, Thomas ends his doubting, Peter becomes a bold leader, and those followers who have hidden away in fear come boldly out into the world proclaiming the good news. They too had seen the Lord. To experience the living Christ is to be transformed.

And the good news is that we too can experience the living Christ. Not in some supernatural encounter, but by awakening to the Spirit of God within ourselves. The Celtic spiritual leader J. Philip Newell said, “The emphasis is not on becoming something other than ourselves but on becoming truly ourselves.” Or as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us, “Christ plays in ten thousand places.” The divine image is our true nature. The life-giving power of God is already within us. This was the message of Jesus.

Jesus reminded us that God’s love is already our light and our life. Like Jesus, we too can live into and out of the life of God. And, when we do, nothing can overcome us. We experience healing and freedom, and we rest in the peace that all is well, for we are one with a loving and gracious God.

We have seen the Lord. And we are new people.

No longer do we notice only darkness and death. We see now through Easter eyes. Where there was sorrow and fear, we now dream of life.

Come on up for the rising
Come on up, lay your hands in mine
Come on up for the rising
Come on up for the rising [today]

Christ is Risen.
Christ is risen indeed.