

Easter Day
John 20:1-18

I Have Seen the Lord*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
April 21, 2019

Last Monday afternoon, I decided to go out and get my annual Holy Week haircut. As I was waiting for my barber, I scrolled through Facebook to see what my priest friends were up to with their Holy Week preparations. And that's when I heard the news. One of my friends had posted: "Religion folks – Notre Dame cathedral in Paris is going up in flames right now."

At first I thought my friend was joking. But when my social media feed started to fill up with images of Notre Dame being engulfed in flames, I realized that this was no joke. And when I saw the cathedral's iconic spire come crashing down, I was in shock. My mind immediately went to that horrific September 11th morning almost two decades ago, when the twin towers collapsed before our very eyes.

In the hours after the fire, I was touched by the outpouring of stories on social media about people's relationships with the cathedral. Maybe you saw some of these stories. I had my own story too.

My relationship with Notre Dame started in the summer after my sophomore year at Yale. I had just finished taking two years of French to satisfy my foreign language requirement. I had fallen in love with both the language and the culture. I didn't have a lot of money, but I did manage to figure out how to spend a month in Paris on a shoestring budget.

I was 19, and I was drawn to the romance and magic of Paris as a place where I could process my recent coming out. I was also drawn to the history and grandeur of that city as I tried to reconcile who I was with a larger church tradition that did not seem to welcome me. I ended up having an amazing time that summer. My visit included a romantic midnight ride on the back of a motorcycle through the streets of Paris, the details of which I won't get into right now.

I remember walking into Notre Dame cathedral one day and staring into one of the great Rose stained glass windows – "La Rosace" as the French call it. I was awestruck by the window's beauty and the mystery of faith that it conveyed. My love affair with the City of Lights, and its stunning cathedral on the Île de la Cité in the middle of the Seine, began that summer and has continued to this day.

* Copyright © 2019 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

And so to see the cathedral go up in flames last Monday was a death of sorts. As a Paris-based staff writer for *The Atlantic* wrote that night:

Messages come in from friends around the world – “Are you okay?” – as if this were another terrorist attack, or a death in the family. In a way, it is a death. In the human family. We are all shocked together.

Today’s gospel reading opens with a similar scene of shock in the aftermath of a horrible death. Mary Magdalene is alone at the tomb of Jesus. Not only had the events of the past three days been incredibly traumatic for her and the disciples, but their hopes and dreams of a new messianic age had collapsed before their very eyes. No true messiah would have been humiliated, tortured, and executed on a cross, like a common criminal.

Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb early in the morning, while it is still dark. She notices right away that the stone covering the entrance had been removed. Immediately her mind goes to grave robbers. She runs to Simon Peter and John, the Beloved Disciple, and tells them about this disturbing turn of events. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him,” she says.

Peter and John rush to the tomb to check things out for themselves, but they eventually leave. Mary, however, remains standing outside of the tomb, weeping. She is so distraught that she doesn’t see the man next to her. When Mary does notice him, she assumes that it’s the gardener. She asks him if he had taken away the body.

The man responds by saying her name: “Mary!” And it is at this point that she recognizes him. “Rabbouni!” – that is, “Teacher” – she exclaims. Like the sheep who recognize the voice of their shepherd, Mary recognizes Jesus’ voice. And so we have, as one commentator put it, the “greatest recognition scene” in all of literature.

I have always loved the fact that Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the resurrected Christ. She was the one who was entrusted with telling the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” This made Mary the very first Christian preacher and evangelist. Indeed, the early church gave her a special title: “*apostola apostolorum*,” which means “apostle to the apostles.”

And, from a sacramental perspective, I like to think of Mary Magdalene as the very first priest. Just as priests touch the Body of Christ at the consecration of the Eucharist (something that will occur later in our mass), Mary was the first person to touch the body of the risen Christ. We know this because Jesus says to her in today’s gospel: “Do not hold on to me.” Jesus tells her instead to go and to spread the Good News to his disciples. And she does exactly that.

Mary Magdalene tells the disciples: “I have seen the Lord.” Five simple words that sum up the entirety of Christian belief and teaching. “I have seen the Lord.” Like Mary, each of us is called to testify how our lives have been transformed by our encounter with the risen Christ. Nothing more and nothing less.

But how can we say, “I have seen the Lord,” when we are separated by some two thousand years from the events of that first Easter morning? None of us sitting here in this church has seen Jesus with our own eyes – at least not in the same way as Mary Magdalene did.

So what exactly does it mean to say “I have seen the Lord”?

To say “I have seen the Lord” is to say this: I know that death has been defeated. That death is never the last word. That love is always stronger than death. That there is always hope, even in the most tragic and despairing moments of our lives. To say “I have seen the Lord” is to engage in an act of radical hope.

The message of Easter boils down to radical hope – even when death is staring you right in the face. And by death I don’t just mean the death of family and loved ones. Death manifests itself in many ways. The death of relationships. The death of jobs. The death of dreams. The death of institutions. And, yes, even the death of buildings.

Not long after I heard the news about Notre Dame, I was standing in line for an event. I overheard a person behind me saying that the Rose windows had been destroyed – that is, they had been melted by the fire. I couldn’t stop thinking about this for the rest of the day and well into the night. I kept on googling “Notre Dame Rose windows” over the next 12 hours to see if they had actually been destroyed, but no one seemed to know for sure.

And suddenly the next morning, I heard the news. Someone from Paris had tweeted a photo of the interior of the cathedral. There was debris, charred wood, and water everywhere. But high above it all, the north Rose window remained intact in all of its beauty and glory. The tweet was simply four words: “La Rosace est sauvée!” – the Rose window is saved! And, as I subsequently learned, the high altar and the great organ had also survived the fire.

To be sure, nothing can bring back the treasures that were destroyed in last week’s fire. No doubt about it – the world suffered a great loss with the burning of Notre Dame. But even in the midst of the horror and the ashes, there is hope. “La Rosace est sauvée!” Or to translate that into Christian terms: “I have seen the Lord.”

Death is never the last word. There is always hope, even in the midst of the most tragic and despairing moments of our lives. That is what Easter is all about. That is what it means to see the world through the lens of the Resurrection. And that is what it means to follow Mary Magdalene in saying: “I have seen the Lord.”