

## **By Faith, Not Sight**

Luke 24:1-12

Rev. Jean Smith

When I was in seminary, preparing to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, one of the requirements for graduation was something called a trans-cultural experience. It meant I had to leave the comforts and security of my home and travel to a second or third world country, somewhere other than the United States and its NATO allies. The church where I was serving as a student pastor, had a sister church in St. Petersburg, Russia, which had recently been given the freedom to meet together for worship after 70 years of the reign of communism. There beautiful church had been seized by the communists and turned into a milk processing plant. Over the years the milk had seeped into the stone floor and left such a stench that it was impossible to use the building for worship. My church was helping this parish build a little chapel beside the towering structure that once held 1,000 worshipers.

The ladies aid society of my church had adopted several elderly women from the parish of Our Lady of Feodoraskya, woman who had no other means of support. They were destitute and all but forgotten. When I shared with the ladies of my church the trans-cultural experience requirement I had to fulfill, they immediately offered to send me to Russia so I could check up on the babushkas they were supporting. So off I went to Russia.

While I was there I met a remarkable woman named Maria. She was one of the babushkas that my church sponsored. She was elderly and blind, and yet she lived by herself in a one room apartment on the fourth floor of a very old and rundown apartment building. As we entered the building from the street the smell of urine overwhelmed me. We climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. I was out of

breath by the time we got there. There was no elevator. As we entered Maria's apartment, a little grayed haired woman, hunched over by age, met me with such warmth and gratitude. She kept thanking me over and over for the help my church was giving her.

As we sat and visited, Maria shared the story of her life. She was 13 years old when her city was completely surrounded by the Germans in what has become known as the 900 day siege. They were prevented from getting any help from the outside. Food, fuel and other supplies were running out. It was a bitter winter. People were dying at the rate of 3,500 each day. Maria was severely malnourished and near starvation. As a result she lost her eye sight. Gradually she became so weak that she was actually mistaken for dead. Each day a wagon would come down the street to collect the dead. Maria was thrown on the wagon. The bodies were taken to a holding center where they would be kept until the ground thawed enough to bury them.

Maria's brother returned home that evening to find that Maria was gone. He refused to accept that she was dead and set off to find her. He searched through the bodies at the holding centers until he was able to find her lying among the dead. As he had desperately prayed, he found her heart was still beating, ever so faintly. He pulled her from among the dead and carried her back home where she was given another chance at life.

At the time of Jesus' death, the men who followed him were forced into hiding. Only the women who followed Jesus had the freedom to go about their everyday chores without being suspected of any wrong doing. This is still the way it is in the Middle East culture today. That is why the women went to the tomb that first Easter morning, while the men stayed out of sight, out of harm's way.

When they arrived, they found the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb where Jesus had been laid. When they entered they did not find Jesus' body. Standing there, wondering what they should do, two men appeared to them. These men weren't ordinary men. Their clothes gleamed like lightning. ***"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" asked the two men. "He is not here; he has risen!"*** (Luke 24:5)

The women must have thought the question very strange. They hadn't come because they refused to accept that Jesus was dead. They had come to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial, preparations that had been interrupted by the Sabbath the day before. Unlike Maria's brother, these women had witnessed the death of their beloved friend and teacher. They had watched from the foot of the cross and heard Jesus cry out his last words, ***"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."*** (Luke 23:46) They saw him breathe his last breath. They stayed for it all, even when all the others beat their breasts and turned away.

The two men explained to the women, ***"He is not here. He has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"*** (Luke 24:6-7) Somehow it all began to make sense to them. Somehow they remembered what Jesus had told them. What they could not understand then was suddenly making sense. They went back to the place where the disciples were hiding and told them everything they had heard and seen. But their words seemed like idle tales to those who heard them.

For an ever increasing number of people in our society, the resurrection is considered just an idle tale, a fabrication of the imagination of those who arrived that morning at the tomb. In our post-modern, post-Christian world, which has also

come to be called the "age of irrational man", we who believe in a risen Savior are considered to be most irrational.

It was a good thing Maria's brother refused to accept that she was dead on the night she lay half-alive in a heap of decaying flesh. She was given another chance to live because of his efforts. It's a good thing those who first visited Jesus' empty tomb refused to believe he was dead, because he had risen. You and I are given another chance at life because Jesus has risen. There is no need for anyone to perish, because Jesus has risen. Christ is offered to everyone. To all who believe he gives the power to become the children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...." (Romans 8:17)

As I stood to leave after my visit with Maria, I heard the bells of St. Nicholas Cathedral which towered over the neighborhood, just across the street. I was drawn, to the window, over powered by the sound of the bells. As I looked out on the golden domes sparkling in the bright sunlight, I was overcome by their beauty; five golden domes glistening in the noonday sunlight. In that moment I completely forgot that Maria was blind and I turned to her and started to say, "Maria, look," but as I began to speak, I realized Maria couldn't see what I saw. She was after all blind. So I choked back the words, thinking, I suppose, that my telling her to look would bring into sharp focus her terrible weakness that I thought her blindness must be. But as I looked at Maria, her face was radiant. She was reflecting the beauty of her faith in her risen Lord as she looked out in the direction of her church. She didn't have eyes to see but she had faith to see.

I realized then that I was handicapped. It was I that had the poor eyesight. Raised in an affluent society with all my needs met, never really having to rely on God, at least not the way Maria has had to rely on Him, it was I who lacked vision. I realized then that Maria saw even more than I did. She saw with spiritual eyes.

*"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here! He has risen!"* May the God who has raised Jesus from the dead, give you eyes to see and faith to believe, *"He has risen. He has risen indeed."*