

Unveiled Faces

John 20:1-10

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Early 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. (NRSV)

What does a piece of cloth mean to you? I have here in my hands a cloth—a napkin, really, rolled up. What might it symbolize for you? Does seeing this cloth increase your belief in Jesus, or enhance your faith? Probably not, and that's ok, because it didn't do anything for Peter, either.

On the morning of what we now call Easter, Peter was the first person to go inside the tomb, which means that he, according to the gospel of John, was the first person to see everything inside. Since verse 5 suggests the tomb had a low doorway, I imagine that to get inside, Peter had to bend down and crawl in on his hands and knees. That's when he saw the cloth lying in the corner—actually, he saw two linen cloths. The first cloth was the standard one used to wrap a dead body. It was a large cloth, probably still fragrant from the hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had used on the body of Jesus (19:38-40). This large, fragrant cloth had been tossed aside and was now lying in a messy heap (v. 5).

The second cloth, however, was the more intriguing of the two. The second cloth, also made of linen, was much smaller. In Greek it's called a *soudarion*, and it was just big enough to cover a person's face, about the size of a dinner napkin. When Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea laid the body Jesus on its back, this second cloth was the one they had draped over his face. It was a face veil. Now with the body of Jesus mysteriously gone, Peter noticed that the face veil was neatly rolled up all by itself (v. 7). Though he saw it, he had no idea what it symbolized. He failed to grasp what it meant.

A minute after Peter crawled into the tomb, the Beloved Disciple also crawled inside. The Beloved Disciple appears only in the gospel of John, and we are never told what his proper name

was. He's simply referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved. When this Beloved Disciple gets inside the tomb, he also sees the face veil neatly rolled up in a corner.

And he believes (v. 8). The Beloved Disciple sees, and his seeing causes him to believe. Unlike Peter who doesn't quite get the point, the Beloved Disciple perceives what this face veil might mean. For him the rolled face veil symbolizes something. For him it is pregnant with theological and spiritual meaning.

The gospel of John never tells us what this face veil symbolizes. Instead the story invites us to ponder the face veil and figure out for ourselves what it symbolizes. If you meditate for a while on this image of a face veil, you might remember that Exodus 34:29-35 has another story about another face veil. In this story, Moses is having conversations with God up on top of Mount Sinai; and when Moses comes back down the mountain, the people of Israel notice that the skin of his face is shining. The luminous glory of God is reflected on Moses' shining face. This reflected glory is a wee bit too much for the people of Israel, and so for their sake Moses wears a face veil. But whenever he goes up Mount Sinai to talk some more with God, he takes the veil off so that he can see and have communion with the glory of God.¹

The gospel of John probably wants us to connect the two face veils in our minds. Moses carefully laid aside his face veil and ascended Mount Sinai to commune with God's glory, and something similar happens to Jesus. When he rose from the dead, Jesus carefully laid aside his face veil before ascending to heaven to commune with God and share in God's glory. Jesus is a new Moses. The face veil in the empty tomb symbolizes that Jesus has ascended to where God is. It suggests that Jesus is now basking in the glorious light of God. It implies that his face now shines with divine light. It signifies that Jesus is deeply and fully communing with God.

This kind of metaphorical thinking may have been going on in the mind of the Beloved Disciple. When his physical eyes see the face veil, perhaps his mind jumps back to the story of Moses, and he suddenly perceives that Jesus must now be face-to-face with God's glory. Whatever his mental processes were, the gospel of John wants us to realize that in this moment, the Beloved Disciple has come to believe that Jesus has been glorified. In the simple language of verse 8, the Beloved Disciple sees and believes.

You might be wondering why Peter did not also see and believe. After all, both men were in the same tomb at the same time and saw the same face veil, neatly rolled up. So why did the

Beloved Disciple immediately believe, while Peter did not? Why didn't Peter comprehend the meaning of what he saw?

The answer is found in the choice of Greek verbs. Greek has a variety of verbs for seeing, and the story uses a different verb for each man. When Peter sees the face veil, the Greek word is *theōreō*, which among other things means to be a spectator of something. So we might say that Peter looks at this face veil as a spectator; he's watching with a certain amount of passive detachment without much interest in getting personally involved.

There's a different verb for the Beloved Disciple. When he sees the face veil, the Greek word is *eidō*. *Eidō* is a hugely important word in all four gospels because it refers to the kind of seeing that leads to faith and worship. Especially in the gospel of John, *eidō* in its various forms is the mode of seeing that takes us to believing. The word *eidō* refers to a deeper kind of seeing. It includes spiritual insight and spiritual knowledge. This way of seeing is intimate and active. It gets us personally involved in what God is doing in the world through Christ. It leads to a kind of communion with God.²

In a moment, after the singing of a hymn, we will enact communion together. We call this "communion" because in this ritual we have a chance to commune intimately with God in Christ. For the Beloved Disciple, the face veil was a route to intimacy with God. In a similar way, this bread and cup can be for us a route to intimacy with God. For the Beloved Disciple, the face veil was a symbol of what God is up to in the world. Similarly, this bread and cup can be for us symbols of what God is up to in the world. For the Beloved Disciple seeing led to believing. Here at this table, seeing and tasting could also lead to believing.

As in so many aspects of the Christian life, our intent is crucial. As we walk to this table, let us not go as Peter went into the tomb, with the attitude of a spectator. Instead let us go with the attitude of the Beloved Disciple, with the intent to get personally involved. To paraphrase Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18, let us approach the table of Jesus with our faces unveiled, hoping to see the glory of God, so that we may be transformed from one degree of glory into another.

Notes

1. Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999, 2003), 207. According to Schneiders, there's also a linguistic connection between John 20 and Exodus 34. In the Aramaic of the Targums (*Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Neofiti*), the Greek word *soudarion* is used to translate the Hebrew word for "veil" in Exodus 34:33-35.

2. Verses 1-10 actually use three different Greek words for seeing, not just two. In verse 1, Mary Magdelene sees the tomb from the outside; the Greek is a form of *blepō*, which can mean little more than a brief or cursory glance. When the Beloved Disciple first appears at the tomb in verse 5 and bends down to look in from the outside, the word is again *blepō*. The fact that he only sees the larger body cloth at this point again suggests his looking is cursory. In verse 6, Peter is the first one inside, which allows him to physically see (*theōreō*) everything, including the smaller face veil. But when the Beloved Disciple enters in verse 8, he fully sees (*eidō*) in both the physical and spiritual sense. By this simple shift of verbs, the gospel points to a progressively deeper level of seeing that finally leads to believing. All looking is not the same.