

Who Was That Masked Man?

A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty Hi-Yo Silver ... the Lone Ranger! With his faithful Indian companion, Tonto, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early West. Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The Lone Ranger rides again!

Though I grew up mostly in California, I spent a good part of many summers with both sets of my grandparents in our home state of Pennsylvania. My mother's parents lived in town but father's family were country people with a dairy farm and an ancient farmhouse. In California my tech-loving dad had bought us a TV and my mother's taste ran to sleek modern design, but on the farm things hadn't changed much since the 20's. The phone was a wooden box on the wall with a crank, connected to the party line and the phone number was a combination of long and short rings. There was still a pump by the kitchen sink and although indoor plumbing

had been installed in the basement, my grandfather still thought it was sort of disgusting. The evening entertainment was sitting in the parlor listening to a radio that was taller than I was. Pop-pop's favorite was the Lone Ranger. At the end of almost every action-packed adventure someone asked "Who was that masked man?"

Jesus' appearances after the resurrection are variously described in the four gospels, in Acts and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. They *never* recognize him! You have to think that crucifixion probably takes a lot out of a man so surely he was changed, but it's still hard to understand how they could be so dense. Last week Rev. Lillie preached (John 21) about the fish breakfast on the beach, and how Peter and the others didn't know who Jesus was until he handed them a miracle. The travelers on the road to Emmaus in our Gospel lesson this morning were not of the Twelve, so maybe they didn't know him as well, but the fishermen were of the close group who followed Jesus daily. How could they not know him? The women at the tomb didn't understand what they were seeing either. They meet a mysterious messenger or messengers, and they are told that Jesus is risen and it terrifies them. In John 20 Mary Magdalene is alone in the garden when Jesus appears; even she doesn't know him until he calls her by name.

There are a lot of ways to interpret the events of those days. We know the accounts were written long afterward and from different points of view. The four gospels all agree that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb on Easter morning and found the stone rolled away, and all six accounts say Jesus Commissioned the disciples to spread the message. There are different descriptions of who was with Mary. The Gospels tell about one or two angels or messengers who announce the resurrection, and in Matthew all the women meet Jesus while on their way back to tell the others. Mark and John tell about Jesus' special appearance to Mary, but in 1 Corinthians, Paul leaves her out saying Jesus appeared to Peter, then the Twelve, then to 500 and then James, and then himself. Luke tells of Peter running to the empty tomb and finding the linen; John says he was there too and in fact he got there first. In Matthew, Mark and John the disciples are sent to meet Jesus in Galilee, (which is how they come to be waiting on the beach and decide to go fishing). In Luke and Acts (which were probably by the same author) they are told to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, which appears at Pentecost. Mark, Luke and John have Jesus appearing to the disciples in a room, but in Matthew they meet on a mountain in Galilee. John tells the story of the catch of fish, and Jesus' conversation with Peter about feeding the sheep. Mark and Luke have the story about the road to Emmaus and

describe the Ascension, which Matthew and John leave out. So we piece the story together from all these sources and we have a picture of a group of ordinary people trying to make sense of the impossible.

Should we look for a rational explanation for extraordinary occurrences? Like what if Jesus didn't actually die on the cross? There is that whole question of why his death took only hours instead of days. Maybe he was given a drug, or perhaps he shut down his vital signs as an act of will and physical discipline. Then he revives for forty days, visits the disciples, and tries to impart some last instructions they missed during the years of his ministry. Or what if the body was stolen and hidden? Then what they saw was a vision as their minds tried to make sense of their loss in light of his teaching. Maybe the whole story is an example of the working of quantum mechanics, and Jesus both dead and alive like Schrodinger's cat. But even if we could prove any of these hypotheses, what would we profit, what would we learn?

I think we learn from scripture by not trying to torture the literal history and seeking instead the spiritual truth. Each encounter with the risen Jesus tells us a truth about faith. Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb and she is sunk in misery and the loss of one she loved most. By grace she hears him call her by name and experiences the presence of her lord. She is

afraid; she is amazed; she is finally humbled and she believes. She goes to tell the other disciples. In spite of all Jesus told them, they aren't going for it. They are afraid for their own safety and hiding in a locked room when Jesus appears, and then they are afraid of him and think he is a ghost. As always in his teaching, he doesn't give them complicated explanations such as they are used to hearing from the priests; he demonstrates by sitting down to dinner. Then he gives them the great Commission to spread the word.

On the shore in Galilee, Peter is still probably wracked with guilt over denying Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. Jesus asks him three times "Do you love me?" and redeems Peter by giving him the Commission "Feed my sheep." The truth here is that you must leave fear behind by doing the practical and necessary, and you will be given strength to do the great tasks.

On the day of the resurrection, on the road outside Jerusalem, a disciple named Cleopas is talking with another follower about Jesus' actions in the city, and what the priests did, and the trial and the crucifixion... and here comes Jesus. Guess what, they don't recognize him. They say "You must be the only person in town who hasn't heard about this!" and Jesus just lets them go on and on. He even reminds them about the scriptures and

prophecies. Here's a clue folks! but they miss it. Here's the part I like, though. Even though they don't know him, and don't understand what is going on, they are practicing the kindness and compassion that Jesus preached. They invite him to stay with them and have dinner. When they do that, and when they sit at table in communion and Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, then they know him. We may all struggle with faith, but when we are kind to one another, the face of God is revealed to us. Jesus' breakthrough message was about kindness and compassion to all, to strangers as well as our own family and tribe.

Jesus told his followers that he had to die, and that he would return to them. He told them that the prophecies of the Hebrew testament would be fulfilled in him. He went to Jerusalem knowing he was walking into the hands of enemies. He knew what Judas would do and told him at the last supper to go and do it. He died as a sacrifice, he rose to fulfill a prophecy, he ascended to rejoin the God the Creator, he promised us God's gift of the Holy Spirit to remain with us, and he has given us the hope eternal of his return. The disciples heard him tell them these truths over and over and although they believed *in* him they didn't actually believe him. They were practical human beings just like us and they had as hard a time believing in miracles as we do. In John 20 we see Thomas, and we understand that he

is so heartbroken that he is not convinced about Jesus' appearance to the other disciples. He is disappointed that Jesus is not the triumphant king of Israel they dreamed of. He is disappointed and miffed that he was not present for this supposed miracle of Jesus' appearance. Disappointment is a great enemy of faith. Jesus gives him a break and lets him touch the wounds, but he says *"Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* He demonstrates a lesson about faith using one man's struggle with faith.

Miracles and healings are an important part of the story of the Gospels, and they were an important part of the message spread by the first apostles, but they are not really the heart of the message. I suspect that miracles were important proof to some of the followers, as they are today. For many people the miracles need to be true for the story to be true. But I think Jesus used healing and signs as he used parables as a tool for teaching. He used quotations from scripture in new context so that people would understand the spiritual truth as larger than a memorized string of words. Miracles attract attention, but the power of Jesus' teaching is in the principles. The important truth is compassion and love for all human beings regardless of station or tribe or past history. The real miracle was and is the empowerment of the humble and outcast. The radical message is the

equality of all in the eyes of God. Jesus came as son of God to show us that we are all children of God, and that the eternal Kingdom of Heaven abides in each living human heart and in each immortal soul.

We need to pay attention to what Jesus is saying to us and not monopolize the conversation, as those disciples on the road were doing. In every instance the disciples failed to recognize the resurrected Jesus because they were consumed with what the crucifixion meant to them personally in daily life. I believe that Jesus walks up beside us on the road every day, and we rarely recognize him. We carry on a one-sided conversation. We talk about ourselves, and our own perceived problems. We gossip with God. We complain. We kvetch. We carry on. We are so self-involved that we don't see God walking beside us.

The disciples on the Emmaus road did not understand the events of that Passover week in Jerusalem in the context Jesus explained: *"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."* Most of the followers of Jesus considered themselves people of faith. They knew the scriptures, but they kept that knowledge in a compartment of the mind without connecting it to daily experience. Jesus kept reminding them, but they didn't think it was real. They were trying to understand the truth of

Jesus' teaching, and they were struggling to connect it with scripture and with the practice of religion as they had experienced it in the past. They were in fact a lot like us. I would guess that there were followers of Jesus who didn't put much store in things that some called miracles; they saw a practical explanation, or they understood the story as a demonstration of Jesus' message. But they were converted by the message. They were saved by the message. Ultimately Jesus did not come to heal the sick and lame or to feed the multitudes. If that were the purpose he would be made obsolete by modern medicine and agriculture. Jesus came to teach us, to sacrifice for us and to redeem us.

Jesus is the masked man who comes to save us and to fight for justice. Let us not forget to ask who he is until after he rides into the sunset. Hi-yo Silver! Amen.