

Sermon for the Feast of the Resurrection, Easter Day (4-1-18)

John 20:1-18

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While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. (vs 1) Think of this woman, Mary Magdalene. Imagine her eyes, puffy and bloodshot from all the tears she has shed. Imagine the pain and grief and sheer exhaustion she carried in her body on that cold, dark morning. Her errand was not a happy one; it was a somber, silent, solitary visit to the fresh grave of her rabbi, the teacher to whom she had devoted her life, her dear friend. Imagine Mary Magdalene approaching the tomb with trepidation, seeking some tiny bit of peace or comfort, drawn there by an unshakeable feeling of love and loyalty.

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. (vs 1) Imagine the shock, the disbelief! She doesn't enter the tomb, or even peer inside. Her first instinct is to run, as fast as her tired legs can carry her, to find the others and tell them what she has found. She reaches Peter and John, and they race to the tomb and enter to find the burial cloths lying on the ground, abandoned. No corpse to be found, just empty space, and perhaps a feeling of electric tension hanging in the air...

Then the disciples returned to their homes. (vs 10) SERIOUSLY? Peter and John returned to their homes? They've been following a man who told them repeatedly that he would be put to death and rise again, they find his tomb empty as the sun comes up, and they just turn around and go home? I know today is April Fool's Day, but this is ridiculous.

To be fair, we should try to imagine ourselves in the disciples' shoes. An open, empty tomb, two days after the most shameful kind of public execution? The sensible assumption, the most likely explanation, would be grave robbers. Grave robbers acting on behalf of the Roman governor or the temple authorities, or simple, callous people who find amusement in cruelty... grave robbers would make sense. Just one more indignity, one final humiliation for the troublemaker from Nazareth.

Thank God for Mary Magdalene. Mary doesn't go home. She lingers by her Lord's empty tomb, and she weeps. As if she hasn't cried enough already, she weeps tears of sadness and frustration and fear and despair. You know that expression "wearing your heart on your sleeve"? Mary's entire heart and soul are on display here. And through her tears, through her raw grief and pain, Mary Magdalene sees something that Peter and John did not see. Maybe they weren't able to see; I don't know.

Could it be that Mary's willingness to be present, to remain at the scene of the crime, to bear witness to the injustice of it all, makes her uniquely ready? What if her vulnerability and trust and openness are necessary ingredients in this transformation?

Mary sees two angels, messengers from God, sitting in the space where she knows her Lord's body should be. And when she turns around, she sees another person, a man who asks why she is weeping.

Here is the moment of comic relief in this supremely emotional story -- this greatest of all stories, which takes us all through deepest grief to purest joy. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." (vs 15)

Every time I read these words, I hear my son's three-year-old laughter echoing in my mind. Those sweet, innocent, angelic giggles; and my child's voice -- "She thought he was the gardener!" For the story of the Resurrection was one of his favorites to hear, along with the usual suspects (Noah's ark, David and Goliath, Paul and Silas freed from prison). My little boy wanted to hear the story of the empty tomb, and Mary's loyalty, and Christ's mistaken identity over and over and over again, and I was happy to oblige him, because it is this story, of all stories, that I knew would teach him that true love never dies, that hope is never foolish, and that Christ was and is alive in this world. A lesson I pray he will carry in his heart and mind long after I am gone. A lesson to sustain him through all that life brings.

And how must it have felt, when Mary, through her tears and grief, heard the voice of her Lord calling her by name...? "Mary!" (vs 16) This is her moment of epiphany, resurrection and revelation. It is only when the risen Jesus calls her name that she understands. It is only when the living Lord calls her name that the resurrection becomes reality for her. In that single moment, in that one word, death is destroyed and fear is obliterated and heaven meets earth. In that single moment, everything is changed.

I learned this week that the word *thura*, the ancient Greek term that's translated in the New Testament as a door or opening of a tomb or cave, has another meaning. *Thura* also means "an opportunity, a favorable time for accessing [new possibilities]." In John's version of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene isn't only the first person to find that stone rolled away and see the risen Lord, she's also the first one to know and experience the open *thura* that means the world's horizons are infinitely expanded and reality will never be the same. The door has opened, the new day has arrived, and the very heart of God, which had ceased beating, will never be quiet again.

Listen, for the heartbeat of God. Listen for the heartbeat of God in the silence and the chaos, the laughter and the tears, the songs of the birds and the rhythm of the raindrops. Can you hear it? Can you feel it?

Mary did. Mary heard God's voice in the garden on that Easter morning. Mary's eyes and mind and heart and soul were transformed on that morning, when she discovered newness of life. Maybe Peter and the beloved disciple weren't quite ready; maybe that's why they returned to their homes without experiencing resurrection. Perhaps Mary was ready for the transformative moment because she alone, through her unending loyalty and undying love for her "Rabbouni", was humble enough and vulnerable enough and trusting enough to see the full glory of the resurrection. She didn't hoard her gift, she didn't cling to Jesus; she shared her great joy openly and willingly: "I have seen the Lord." (vs 18)

Mary has seen the Lord, and both she and her entire world have been transformed, renewed, redeemed. This is why Easter matters; this is why we teach this story to our children and grandchildren; this is why we laugh and celebrate and shout Alleluia! It's because the resurrection of Jesus Christ offers us something that cannot be found anywhere else, something we so desperately need.

Hope that cannot be crushed, love that conquers all, life that never ends. This is the gift of Easter. Christ's victory over the powers of death is our victory, too! No evil on this earth, no act of violence or hatred, no grief or sorrow, no weapon or war or wound can take it away. The body of Christ, the heartbeat of God, endures, and fills us and all Creation with life everlasting. Now we can live without fear; now we are free from the enslaving powers of sin and pain and death. The great Presbyterian preacher

William Lemon said it this way: "Easter is not a passport to another world; it is a duality of perception for this one."ⁱⁱ

The door has been opened, the stone rolled away, and the resurrection is here and now. Easter life is everywhere around us. Mary heard it, and saw it, and knew it in the moment the risen Lord spoke her name. If we listen, we may hear him calling our names too.

My friends, God's heart is beating in this aching world, even now. Can you hear it?

Amen.

ⁱ Peter Marty in *The Christian Century*

ⁱⁱ W.P. Lemon quoted in *Backstory Preaching*