

“Easter: The Light Shines in the Darkness”

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

Message for April 17, 2022

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John’s Easter morning sequence is surely one of the most memorable. In the other Gospel readings, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by other women to the tomb. Here, she is alone. There is also a wonderful parallel between the darkness at the opening of this story, and what we hear at the beginning of John’s Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

We are told it was still dark when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb and found it empty. I love that detail—that Easter began in the shadows, well before sunrise. This is the way resurrection works: it gathers itself in the darkness, beginning in such secrecy and hiddenness that when it happens, it can be difficult for us to recognize it at first.

This seems to be how it was for the Magdalene on that first Easter morning. Perhaps it was because of her tears or the early hour that she mistook Jesus for a gardener, but the truth is that despite the promises Jesus had made about his return, nothing could have prepared Mary to see him standing before her, speaking her name.

With the sound of her name came recognition, and with recognition came a choice: would Mary attempt to hold on to Christ and the life she had known, or would she accept his call to leave the empty tomb and proclaim what she had seen?

Thinking back through this story, it is instructive to notice how differently Mary shows up at the tomb (in comparison to the other disciples). She has come to mourn the loss of life, of a body to touch, and to bid goodbye. In her grief she can hardly think clearly. She sees two angels and does not recognize that they are from another realm. She is bereft that Jesus has been taken away, not just by death but by the disappearance of his body. She grieves, she yearns, she weeps. Her words are poignant, and we can feel the hurt and longing in them: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Then, she turns away – and there, standing before her, is Jesus. But she can't SEE that it is Jesus, she can't make sense of this – that he is standing before her. This truth is not revealed until he calls her name.

I never fail to be dazzled by this moment when Jesus calls out the name of the woman whom he finds weeping by his tomb. *Mary*. At the sound of her name, the Magdalene finally sees and knows who has found her there. It is a stunning moment of recognition.

While reflecting on this Bible Wisdom teaching this week, what grabs my attention is not only the way that Mary Magdalene *sees* Christ when he calls her name. What tugs at me this time is how, in that moment of hearing her name, Mary Magdalene must see *herself*.

With a tone that only Christ could have given to it, his speaking of her name conveys everything: all their history, all that passed between them in their friendship, all that he knows of this woman whom he healed and who, along with other women, traveled with him and sustained him from her own resources. He knows her. He sees her. And now he asks her to see herself as he does.

Mary.

In that moment, and in the call and commissioning that will soon come, the risen Christ gives Mary Magdalene to herself. Not, of course, as if he owns or controls her but because, as ever, he knows her and wants to free her from what would hinder her from the life that God desires for her.

Scholars often remind us that the resurrection narratives are really commission stories, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. We are called to enter this story ourselves and recognize that Jesus knows us and wants us to live the life that God desires for us.

Jesus releases Mary from clinging to him. Where holding onto him might seem holy, Christ sees—and enables Mary Magdalene to see—that her path and her life lie elsewhere. Beyond this moment, beyond this garden, beyond what she has known. In going, Mary affirms that she has seen what

she needed to see: not just Christ in the glory of his resurrection, but also herself, graced with the glory that he sees in her.

In the centuries to come, Mary Magdalene will become layered over with other visions that people have of her: other titles, other depictions, other names. Sinner, prostitute, penitent, bride: the stories and legends of who the Magdalene was and what she became will both fascinate us and frustrate our ability to know her. But on this day, the Magdalene we meet in the garden is simply one who has learned to see, and who goes forth to proclaim what she has seen.

An expected ending is now a beginning – of telling the truth about life to those who want to deal only in death, of offering living water and the bread of life to those who want only to buy and sell commodities that perish. Mary speaks, and in her speaking, we find our own voice.

This day, what will we allow ourselves to see: of Christ, of ourselves? How would it be to know ourselves as he does, to see ourselves as he sees us, to know that the risen Christ speaks our name, too, and releases us to tell what we have seen? What will you proclaim as you leave the empty tomb this day?

As you consider these queries, listen to these words from Jan Richardson's Blessing for Easter Day, entitled, "Seen"

*You had not
imagined
that something so
empty
could fill you
to overflowing,

and now you carry
the knowledge
like an awful
treasure
or like a child
that roots itself
beneath your heart:*

*how the emptiness
will bear forth
a new world
that you cannot
fathom
but on whose edge
you stand.

So why do you
linger?
You have seen,
and so you are
already blessed.
You have been seen,*

*and so you are
the blessing.

There is no other
word
you need.
There is simply
to go
and tell.
There is simply
to begin.*