

Sunday, April 17, 2022-Easter

The Christian Story

John 20:1-18

In John's gospel, the Easter star is Mary, Mary Magdalene. Easter starts in tragedy, but God works in the darkness, unseen, unnoticed. The work of evil takes place in the same manner. The chief priests told Roman soldiers, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" Mary repeats the wrong message twice. To Peter and John, she says: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." To the two angels, she says: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." People can get so confused in the darkness. You know how it goes. Someone or something convinces you of something, and it doesn't matter how wrong or false or dumb it might be, you cling to it like Zedekiah. You wouldn't let go of it for anything in the world. And you keep repeating it. "They have taken away my Lord."

When she did see Jesus, "She did not know that it was Jesus." Mary was still trapped in the lie that the Romans and the chief priests, that bastardized ideology of empire and religion, had been spreading around Jerusalem. The government has been known to lie. The church has been known to lie. Big business has been known to lie, In the 1950's big tobacco found scientists in other specialties to write impressive reports that smoking was not harmful. Spent millions to lie to people. Did you know that the original Marlboro Man died from lung cancer? Our own government lied about their belief that all men were created equal. Our own Constitution enshrined the lie of 3/5ths of a person. "The truth was they believe all White men were created equal. The truth is they did not believe that even White women were created equal, in creation nor in civilization. The Government had to pass an amendment to the Constitution to get White women the vote. Then the Government had to pass an "Equal Rights" amendment to get equal protection under the law for women." We are all prone to believe and live by lies. Now, our nation is infected by lies, alternative truth, "truthiness," deception. "What is truth?" we cry like Pilate. Mary sees Jesus alive and still she repeats the government's lie: "They have taken him away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

It's not easy being the hero in the resurrection drama, when you are a woman, in a world dominated by men. Do you know that we have centuries of misinformation about Mary of Magdala that seem to ignore what the gospels actually say of her? Pope Gregory, playing loose with the story, took all the Mary's in the gospel other than the Mary of our Lord and combined them in one Mary and said that was Mary Magdala. A preacher gave a woman a bad reputation for 600 years. "Seven devils," "prostitute," all the usual church lies and judgmentalism. Now, that's a piece of work, but considering that preachers are still prone to blame all of "sin" on Eve, we should not be surprised. But I am here to set this story straight and give Mary her place of honor. All four gospels are certain that Mary Magdala was at the cross and at the resurrection.

It doesn't matter if all the accusations thrown at Mary by popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, and preachers had been true. Women have been living in spite of the false accusations of men forever. Mother Eve took the big one for the whole team and in my favorite resurrection story, from the Eastern Orthodox, when Jesus died, he went to hell

on Saturday, broke down the gates, and let all the prisoners free and Eve led the procession. If Jesus let Eve out of the hell created by men who want to blame women, then more power to Eve. My wife told me she read an Episcopal Lenten devotion that asked "Where was Jesus on Saturday?" The answer: "He went to hell to get Judas." Just saying.

And more power to Mary. Jesus makes the only judgment that matters. On behalf of every woman every wrongly accused, I offer Walt Whitman's poem, "To a Common Prostitute, "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you, Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to glisten and to rustle for you. My girl I appoint you with an appointment, and I charge you to make preparation to be worthy to meet me, And I charge you that you be patient and perfect till I come. Till then I salute you with a significant look that you do not forget me."

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. Jesus says to her, 'Mary!' Jesus calls her by name. As a Christian I can't help but hear God whispering in my ear from Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by **name**, you are mine." Listen carefully and you will hear God call your name. If you are one of those people who now claim you are spiritual but not religious, it will be hard for you to hear God calling your name, because you are not in church where God calls his people by name the most often. Baptist theologian, Barry Harvey, posted on Facebook to a person asserting that the church was inessential to Christian discipleship, these words:

"I have no doubt that you feel things very deeply, but I would caution you that you have yet to understand the importance of the church. The community has little to do finally with intense feelings or experiences. Beware of false dichotomies, e.g., "it's a good thing to own your own faith rather than to say, 'I'll just take that on faith'." Sooner or later America and the global market will leave you alone and unsated, with few or no one around you to whom you are bonded in ties thicker than family or nationality. Spiritual but not religious does not give us a St. Francis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, St. Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Fannie Lou Hamer. Being a disciple is something you learn with others, not something you feel by yourself. It has to do with the bonding of courage to faith, prudence to charity, persistence to hope."

Fred Craddock offers testimony to how much difference it makes to be in church: When you are in the church, the house of God, you get to thinking about God as creator and provider. You become a more thankful person because you have come to church and you have heard the word and you have heard of the love and grace of God. You are different because you have been in church. If you go to worship every week, it begins to get through to you. It makes you different. It opens you to hear God calling your name. That's what happens here. God calls the roll and calls out your name. If you are not hear, the silence is deafening. There's something about the church that runs through your veins that changes you. You know that don't you?

A word for those who may read this sermon later: If you have left the church, and there's nothing physically keeping you from participating, I ask you to consider coming back again. This is the house of God where God speaks and calls you by name. God is calling your name this morning. I know you think I'm being melodramatic but I'm not. I'm trying to help you by speaking truth to you.

Mary stands at the birthplace of the church. Jesus calls his first disciple of the resurrection right there, standing next to the grave. Mary, Mary, sweet Mary. Mary would have known that voice anywhere. Forty years ago, I wrote, "The voice of Jesus was the voice of ten thousand angels in her ears, the sound of trumpets, the 'Alleluia' chorus, the sound of music." God raised Jesus from the dead and hell and death couldn't stop it.

John says, "She turned." A simple bodily move. To turn around. It means everything. Some of you may need to make a turn in your life. Mary turns from the darkness to the light. The eyes that could not see, now see. Mary turns, sees, and says to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)." Mary, you see, in this moment becomes the apostle to the apostles.

Jesus says, "But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." For my Easter's worth, this is the ordination of Mary to preach the gospel. This is on a par with God saying to Moses, "Go tell Pharaoh to let my people go"; God asking, "Whom shall I send?" and Isaiah answering, "Here am I, send me"; God calling Amos "from following the flock, and saying, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel;" God calling twelve disciples to follow him. It's a call, brothers and sisters. It is a call and I recognize it because I belong to the fraternity and sorority of those who are called. God calls people of all kinds and God called Mary to preach resurrection. She should have been the first pope rather than having a pope giving her a bad reputation that lasted over six centuries.

The church rightly has given her a day: July 22, St. Mary Magdalene. If the church made her a saint, at least we can give her reputation its due: Preacher of the gospel.

Mary went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her. Thank God the men listened to Mary. At least some of the lessons of Jesus had sunk into hard, stubborn minds.

When a good friend was sick and dying, Anne Lamott invited her along to a lecture series she was delivering in Park City, Utah. It was the week after Easter. Lamott wrote, "She ought to have one more Easter. Easter is so profound." So, the two friends recreated Holy Week, a week later. On Thursday they had communion, using Coca Cola for wine and Pepperidge Farm Goldfish for the bread broken in remembrance of him. They washed each other's feet.

They celebrated Good Friday, "a sad day of loss and cruelty when all you have to go on is faith that light shines in the darkness and nothing, not death, not disease, not even the government, can overcome it."

She writes for all of us, "I hate it that you can't prove the beliefs of my faith. If I were God, I'd have the answers at the end of the workbook, so you could check as you went along, to see if you're on the right track. Hope is not about proving anything. It's about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us."

Easter morning dawned with a brilliant sun and bright blue sky and they celebrated the resurrection by baking apricot scones, which seems somehow just right.

I would like for you to have an Easter like that. Breathe easily, live deeply, love passionately, hold tightly to your dear ones, give your life away. Let all the good news that you know become alive for you on Easter.