

Is Seeing Believing? Message for Easter Sunday 2016 -- Based on John 20. 1-18

The Easter story from John's Gospel is my favourite one of the four; it's such a personal account of Mary Magdalene's experience from grief through desolation to the amazing and wonderful experience of coming face to face with the risen Christ. This is the same Mary from whom Jesus healed many demons that had made her so ill. This is the Mary who followed Jesus and took care of him, who loved Jesus, who was at the foot of the cross when he died. This is a story of love, of grief and of amazing belief—it's truly a story of questioning faith, conversion and evangelism.

So, it's the day after the Jewish Sabbath, early on the Sunday morning after Jesus' death, Mary goes to the garden to Jesus' burial tomb. We can only speculate as to why—maybe to pray, or to mourn, or maybe just to be close to him. She sees the stone has been rolled away from the entrance, and she must have looked inside because she leaves and runs to find Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved (no-one is truly sure who that disciple is, conjecture has it as John) and she tells them: "They have taken the Lord out of the grave. We do not know where they have put Him." (v2) So the men literally race off to go to see for themselves. The other disciple is first to the tomb, but does not venture in. Peter follows next and looks into the tomb and sees the burial linens lying there and the special cloth that is used to cover the head is rolled up and lying on its own. They too are puzzled. If it was grave robbers, they wouldn't have taken precious time to unwrap the body nor would they have bothered to nicely roll up the burial linens. I wonder if Peter called the other disciple in to verify his findings, because he then joins Peter in the tomb. What to make of this turn of events? What does this mean? This is a mystery, so, where is Jesus then? John tells us the other disciple believes as soon as he sees the linens lying there, but neither of them really 'understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead' (v 9). And what do they do? They return home.

But Mary doesn't leave, she stays at the tomb, weeping, overcome with grief. She doesn't understand what has happened. The two men came and went, they didn't have any answers either. Imagine her distress. She was at the foot of the cross when Jesus was so brutally killed, the man whom she loved and who loved her too, and now his body is gone! She looks again into the tomb, I suppose just to confirm what she knew, to help her come to terms with it, maybe just to be close to the place where Jesus' body last lay. Only this time the tomb is not empty, there are angels there, and interestingly she's neither frightened nor surprised by them, she takes them in stride it seems. Maybe in her heartache and deep sorrow it didn't quite register with her just who or what these beings were; maybe they just looked like regular people, or maybe Mary was one of those people who saw angels quite regularly—impossible to know. They ask her "Woman, are you weeping?" Now to our 21st century ears, addressing Mary as "woman" may sound pejorative, but in the parlance of the day, it was a term of endearment. And even through her grief, she's has sufficient presence of mind to respond to these messengers of God: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." So deep is her distress that when she turns and sees a man standing before her, she doesn't even recognize Jesus. But you know, I think I can understand that. She's not expecting him to be alive, she saw him die, saw him dead, saw him taken to be buried, why would she expect to see him standing there talking to her, burial linens notwithstanding? It goes against all logical human experience, and somehow beyond human comprehension—yet here he is. Jesus lives! God the Son, it seems, cannot be killed, the evil of the world, while active and prevalent, cannot kill God. An extraordinary, unbelievable, never happened before nor has it since event. This is the hallmark of our Christian faith. God cannot, will not, be overcome by the forces of evil.

Then Jesus calls Mary by name and immediately she recognizes him as her Rabbouni, her teacher, her Lord. Imagine how elated she feels, her heart ache, her grief is gone! She reaches out to him, to touch him, to hold him. Of course she does, wouldn't you? It would be an instinctive gesture to want to grab him and hug him! But in this state and at this point of me, she cannot hold onto him he tells her. It matters not, Jesus who was dead, is really alive! Differently to be sure, but alive!

John's accounting of the resurrection is the story of how three different people responded to an empty space and a stack of neatly piled linens. It occurred to me as I was pondering the scripture, that this story is a microcosm of how many of us respond when faced with something new or unusual that challenges us to rethink what we're sure we know or what we've always believed. Mary is the first one to be confronted with this new and confusing reality, and her immediate response is to run to bring others to share the experience with her. Peter, true to his personality, is first off the mark and when he gets to the tomb, boldly steps into it, but is thoroughly flummoxed at the sight of the empty grave clothes, and doesn't seem to know what to think. The other disciple outruns Peter and gets there first, but is hesitant, unsure and waits for Peter to take the lead into the tomb, and then follows. I wonder; did Peter have to call him to join him—some people need to be accompanied into the unfamiliar. And when he sees, his response is instantaneous: he believes, something incredible has happened to be sure, and somehow it's touched him deeply, but what does it mean? The men leave and go home, no doubt shaking their heads, trying to figure it all out.

Mary, however, is unable to draw herself away from the scene. She needs to stay there and ponder it some more, as though she needs to allow herself the time to take it all in, become fully engulfed in this confusing and painful experience. She has to go back into the tomb, to see it again, is just seeing really believing? In the rawness of her emotion, in the aching need for Jesus, the one whom she so loved, she sees the Lord's messengers, but yet doesn't see Jesus—until he calls her by name. I wonder, was Jesus there the whole time and the three of them just couldn't see him? Mary recognizes Jesus' voice, kind of like the parable of the shepherd who calls the sheep; the sheep really know their shepherd's voice. In her total vulnerability, when her defenses are completely shattered, Jesus comes to her. Mary Magdalene, she is the first one to whom Jesus reveals himself as the risen Lord—not one of the twelve disciples, not even the disciples in Jesus' inner circle, but Mary, a woman. The significance of this is not to be undervalued in the extremely patriarchal society of 2000 years ago. And Jesus instructs Mary, a woman, to go to his brothers, and tell them she has seen the risen Jesus, and that he will be coming to them too. Verse 18: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'" and she told them that he had said these things to her." And so it is Mary Magdalene, a devoted woman disciple, a woman whom Jesus had healed, who becomes the first Christian evangelist.

On this day when we celebrate the most divine miracle of earth's history, the celebration of our risen Lord, I invite you to remember an encounter you have had with our living God. I strongly suspect that you all have a story of an experience or encounter of our Lord or you probably wouldn't be sitting here today! And it will be different for each of us, as Christ meets us where we are at, and at the times when we are ready and open to receive him. Sometimes God even send messengers to help point the way to the living Christ in our midst, because our own preconceived notions or expectations of how things should be can block us from seeing what is right in front of us.

Let me end with a short prayer that is a favourite of mine:

Living Christ: on this very special day, when we celebrate your rising to life again, we ask that you open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you, our hearts to know you and our minds to understand you.

Alleluia! Christ is risen

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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