

“Your Turn”

I think I understand at least a little bit what Mary Magdalene was going through. I count it one of the privileges of my life that I was able to be present when my best friend died in 2005. Bob had struggled with cancer for some years, and as things deteriorated my wife Priscilla and I went to Cincinnati to be with Bob and his family. It was a difficult and desperate time there in the hospital. Bob’s wife Debbie is a nurse, and Priscilla is a Family Practice physician. They knew what was happening as events unfolded, and were able to be marvelously helpful. In one of the very last things he said, Bob called them “angels of mercy.” I, on the other hand, was pretty much useless.

As the end approached, Bob was surrounded by his father, his wife and his children, while Priscilla and I maintained a respectful distance. Debbie turned to me and said, “David, come over here and say something.” I walked over to the bed and I said, “Good night, sweet prince.” It’s a line from Hamlet, and I knew Bob would know the rest of it: “and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” Then I said, quoting from Romans, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”¹ And then from one of Jesus’ stories, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”² And he died.

At first the room filled with sounds of grieving. But then, over the course of several minutes, things began to subside. And finally I knew what to do. As the nurses were cleaning up the body I called the funeral home. I sat alone with Bob to wait for them to arrive. I stayed with him as they transferred him onto the gurney, and rode down the elevator with them as they took him out to the hearse. It meant the world to me to be able to honor my dear friend in that simple way. It was all I could do, and I got the chance to do it.

But Mary Magdalene was not so blessed. Helpless and hopeless, she had stayed near Jesus as he was crucified. She kept vigil near the foot of the cross. She watched and wept as he died. She watched as Joseph of Arimathea took away the body and Nicodemus came with spices to prepare Jesus for burial. She saw the garden tomb where they laid Jesus as sundown and the Sabbath approached. Then at the earliest opportunity, even before daybreak on Sunday morning, she returned to the tomb simply to be alone with Jesus. It was all she could do, all she had left. But even this was denied her.

The stone had been rolled away. She ran to tell Peter and “the other disciple,” whom tradition identifies as John. They came and stayed just long enough to verify

¹ Romans 14:8b.

² This comes from the parable of the talents, Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-27. “Servant” is from the RSV translation.

that the tomb was empty. They left. Mary stayed alone at the tomb—weeping, utterly lost, with nowhere to go. Jesus was her home.

I'm not sure exactly what we expect from the Bible, but it probably isn't this. We'd like a neat and tidy happy ending, but that's not what we get. Instead we get an extended series of stories in which Easter dawns on different people at different times. John sets the whole thing up in the very first chapter of his gospel when he says of Jesus, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."³

There's the drama: when it comes to looking at Jesus and seeing God, some people will get it and some people won't. Some people will sort of get it for a while, but then not quite. But people who do get it have their lives changed.

One after another in this gospel, prospective believers encounter Jesus:

- Nicodemus hears Jesus tell him that he must be born again, but he doesn't understand. Nicodemus is thinking obstetrics; Jesus is talking theology.⁴
- A Samaritan woman meets Jesus near a well and is astonished at the things Jesus knows about her, such as the fact that she has had five husbands and a roommate. She says to her neighbors, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" (With all those husbands there couldn't have been time for much else.) But she doesn't really understand what she's experiencing. As her story ends she asks, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"⁵
- A man who has been born blind receives his sight from Jesus who asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man responds, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus responds, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." At last he says, "Lord, I believe." It's never easy.⁶
- And then there is Lazarus, whom Jesus raises from the dead, calling him forth from the tomb, by crying, "Lazarus, come out!" And he does... and then he never says a word!⁷

People see but they don't, understand and then they don't, sort of believe and then they don't; and John's Easter story is a fitting culmination.

To begin with, there's that silly, boys-will-be-boys footrace to the tomb. John gets there first and he looks in but doesn't go in. What's that? Peter arrives and goes in and kind of takes inventory; he notices where the various wrappings are. Then John

³ John 1:10-12.

⁴ John 3:1-21.

⁵ John 4:1-30.

⁶ John 9:1-41.

⁷ John 11:1-38, 12:1-11.

finally does go in and sees and *believes*... so he gets there first, twice. But neither one of them yet understands what he has experienced in a greater sense, in terms of scripture. They haven't fully grasped the meaning. Then they leave.

But Mary won't leave. She can't. Imagine the exhaustion, the frustration, the anguish and grief! And everybody she sees asks her why she is weeping! First it's the angels she sees as she bends over to look into the tomb: the head angel and the foot angel: "Woman, why are you weeping?" She's still focused on the body of Jesus: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Without receiving a response, she turns around. She sees Jesus, but she doesn't really see Jesus, she sees a gardener, who asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 50% on the grammar here: the "whom" is impressive, but the dangling participle in "looking for" is not so great. "Whom do you seek?" would be better. Mary responds to this semi-grammatical man she assumes to be a gardener, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Then everything changes when he speaks her name: "Mary!" And her anguish dissolves into hope. This may be the most moving single word in scripture as the one who is Love calls Mary by name. It's an exquisite reminder that God doesn't just love all of us, God loves each of us.

That's more or less the end of today's lesson; emotionally at least it's the denouement. But John is just getting started with Easter.

There will be a series of wonderful post-resurrection appearances as Easter keeps dawning on more and more people in different ways. The risen Christ visits the disciples in the upper room, where they had shared a last supper together. But Thomas isn't there, so Christ returns again a week later. The disciples then leave Jerusalem and go back to Galilee, trying to go back to their boats and their nets almost as though nothing had happened, like soldiers returning to their farms after a war. But the risen Christ finds them there and there is a miraculous catch of fish and a seaside breakfast in which Peter in particular is forgiven and restored to a new life in which he will at last serve Christ with courage and faithfulness.

The story keeps going, it keeps happening, not as an isolated incident but as a series of encounters as Easter comes to different people in different times and places. And now it's your turn.

We know this story; in one way or another it's why we're all here this morning, even if we tell ourselves we're here to keep peace in the family or fulfill a school assignment or to observe a holiday or to hear the wonderful music. We hear this news that love conquers death and we watch it dawn in the lives of the various characters and we marvel at how slow they are to catch on; but we also admit that for a lot of us it's a gradual process and sort of two steps forward and one step back.

Some people come to trust in the truth of Easter through the accounts of others or through some sort of external evidence or even through attempts at logical proof.

More power to you if you're impressed by the Shroud of Turin or the infallibility of ancient witnesses; and goodness knows there will be lots of sermons preached today to pound away at why you *have* to believe. But we all know you don't have to.

The real issue for most of us really isn't so much do we have to believe in resurrection just the way the Bible tells it because the Bible actually tells it lots of different ways; and the characters in the Bible, eyewitnesses even, get there by lots of different routes if they get there at all.

Most of us ultimately decide that Easter is true because we have an experience of the living Christ: not a bad Bible movie figure in robe and sandals, but a presence that we come to think of as the presence of Christ. Often this happens in the wake of a devastating experience. For me it was in the aftermath of my divorce that I first realized that I was forgiven, even though I could not yet forgive myself; loved, although I felt unlovable; already living a new life, when all I could see around me was the shambles of the old. That warmth and presence and peace was the warmth and presence and peace of Christ in my life; it was Easter in my life. And once you've seen Easter anywhere you begin to see it nearly everywhere.

Easter happens over and over and over again, sometimes when faith itself crumbles as old ways of thinking about God don't work any more and newer, more grown up ones take their place. We're not just born again, Nicodemus: we're born again and again and again and again. That's because Easter isn't just the story that happened, it's the truth that is, and the truth that makes all the difference: to John, and Peter, and Mary Magdalene, and you and me.

Because Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

Amen