

Easter Sunday April 4, 2021.
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Recognizing Resurrection
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It looked like the end of the road. Everything was over and done; it was finished. This ending didn't feel like the satisfaction of a job well done. It didn't feel like a well completed project. This ending was all sorrow, fear, confusion, and isolation, all the stuff of profound grief.

That is how Easter begins, although it isn't easy to recognize it as a beginning. It doesn't begin like the opening lines of a story or a movie. It doesn't start with an explanation of what to expect. Instead Easter begins in the heart of human suffering and loss; all the things associated with endings. It begins when it was still dark.

The Gospel According to John takes us from the miraculous life of Jesus, the heartbreak of betrayal, his arrest and trial, his beating and crucifixion, his death and burial - all his experiences as the Incarnate Word of God, deep into what God does with the worst of human choices and actions. Easter begins not in some fairy tale realm far away, but in what is reality for most of humanity.

That was the reality for Mary Magdalene who we read in John's Gospel went to the tomb where Jesus was buried so early in the morning it was still dark. This darkness might be the author of the Gospel's way of saying Mary Magdalene was feeling not only deep sorrow and grief, she may have been feeling hopeless. Jesus had done some amazing things and said some wonderful things but now he was dead and gone. It was over. There was no salvation now. No Messiah. She and Jesus' other followers had been wrong about him. Now, she wasn't sure where to go or what to do.

In such hopelessness she made her way to Jesus' tomb. A tomb is not associated with beginnings. It's a place of coming to terms with endings, of closure. A couple years ago my husband and his daughter and I took a trip Menomonee Falls in Wisconsin to visit his brother's grave. We hadn't been able to see his brother before he died, so visiting the grave gave us closure; we were able to make peace with my brother-in-law's death. And to pray and remember. To look back on his life. That is perhaps typical of what to expect when visiting the burial place of a loved one: closure, peace, and looking back.

But that peaceful closure, John's Gospel tells us, is not what Mary Magdalene found at Jesus' tomb. She experienced shock and high drama when she got there and saw someone had left the door open and Jesus was nowhere to be found. How could she grieve now? So in dramatic fashion, Mary started running around. She ran to Peter who was with another follower of Jesus called the "Beloved Disciple". Scholars tell us the first readers of the Gospel would have known who that person was. Modern readers are told scholars have several theories about this disciple's identity, including perhaps being the leader of the community that John's Gospel came from. But for right now, all we need to know is Mary ran to two of Jesus' disciples and told them something was wrong with Jesus' tomb: he wasn't in it.

In keeping with the drama all three of them then ran back to the tomb, each getting there at different times and seeing for themselves what was and wasn't in the tomb. That's when we learn the body of Jesus is indeed gone, but his burial clothes were left behind and someone had taken the time to neatly fold the cloth that had covered his

head. This discovery seems to be enough for one of the disciples to believe, but not stick around. Both Peter and the other disciple left Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb, unable to explain the emptiness of it to her or be with her in her grief.

That is when two angels show up and speak to Mary, asking her why she was crying. All Mary could answer is her shock, fear, and confusion over Jesus' missing body. She seemed to think something terrible had happened and she wanted to put things right. She might have been thinking Jesus was dead, but he had been her beloved teacher, leader, and healer who had liberated her from illness, and he deserved better than this drama. His death may have been violent and unjust, meant to send a message to anyone who stood up to religious and political power, but all that was over now, and he deserved a peaceful resting place.

But it wasn't really over. That is why the tomb was empty and why two angels appeared and spoke to Mary. Jesus had died, and God didn't allow death to have the final say. God took death and all the betrayal, injustice, pain, suffering, violence, abuse of power that went with it and negated them all with something new and different and so very difficult to recognize: Resurrection Life.

All too often this part of Christianity gets misinterpreted or misunderstood. The word "resurrection" is actually used a lot, but rarely is it used correctly. We can see the word resurrection used in entertainments like novels and movies and art like poetry all the time. You might even hear the word in science. Most often, it is used whenever a character or living thing thought to be dead is somehow restored or brought back to life. Always, it is restored to life that is just like it was before "death". The person/character or living thing looks the same, sounds the same, and often behaves the same as they did before. As miraculous as that phenomenon is, however, it isn't what happened to Jesus in his tomb.

God did not bring Jesus back from the dead. Far from it. God raised Jesus to a new kind of life. Not necessarily a life after death, though I'm not trying to say we won't be reunited with our loved ones after they and we die. Easter is not about life beyond the grave. Easter is the celebration of God's power, power that does not take life, but creates it, redeems it, even transforms death into it. And this is what gives us hope, hope that sustains and carries us through all the worst that life can throw at us and at the same time helps us see and connect with the goodness and beauty that are also in the world.

Perhaps that is why Mary Magdalene did not recognize Jesus in the garden outside the tomb. If we think about it, it's a fair question to ask why Mary didn't recognize the Risen Jesus. She was one of his disciples. She had been healed by him. She followed him. She listened to him. She financially supported him. She knew him. Why wouldn't she recognize him when he stood beside her outside the tomb? Why didn't she recognize the sound of his voice when he first spoke to her?

Many well-meaning scholars and preachers explain that Mary didn't recognize the Risen Jesus because her profound grief kept her from recognizing him. Or she wasn't willing to let go of her expectations and therefore couldn't recognize him. But the author of John's Gospel may not be making an observation about grief by including this detail about not being able to recognize the Risen Jesus. Because Mary Magdalene wasn't the only disciple who could not recognize the Risen Jesus at first. Later in John's

Gospel two other disciples of Jesus walked with along the road to a town called Emmaus while he talked for hours and despite spending all that time with him didn't recognize him until they had stopped at a wayside, had dinner, and Jesus blessed and broke bread. When the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, they didn't recognize him until he showed them the marks from the crucifixion on his body. For Mary, it wasn't until he spoke her name that she realized the man in the garden was her Lord and teacher. When Jesus brought his friend Lazarus back from the dead, no one had any trouble recognizing him as soon as he emerged from his burial place still wrapped up in the garments of death. We can assume once he was restored to life Lazarus resumed living as he had before he had gotten sick and died.

With Jesus it is different because what happened to Jesus was different. The Risen Jesus was not recognized until he brought back something from the shared experience of the past. Which might indicate Jesus' Resurrection is not a way to go back to the way life was before his death. The Risen Christ did not resume the way of life before his death and burial. No more parable telling. No more healing the sick. No more feeding thousands. The Risen Jesus did none of those things. Instead the Risen Jesus appeared to those he had known and called them to participate in new life. Resurrection is God's way for life to move forward, a new way to live that isn't based on scarcity or fear or violence or prestige or inequality or greed but life as God intended from the very beginning. Life characterized by God's love for us all. Through Jesus' Resurrection we learn what God does with sin; God does not punish sin, God redeems it, turns it upside down and inside out, deprives sin of its power over us, liberates us from living in scarcity and fear to live in God's abundance. Resurrection life is where there is more than enough for everyone, where wealth isn't based on what others do not have, and death is not a tool for keeping people afraid and oppressed.

I read something a preacher wrote about how this year, as we experience our second Easter in a pandemic when most of us have not returned to in-person worship, that it might be harder for preachers to proclaim Jesus' Resurrection because most of us might not feel joyful right now. It might not feel like Easter, it might feel like an ending, especial for those grieving the loss of loved ones who died from COVID-19. He may be right. For me, I find it frustrating to proclaim Jesus' Resurrection when it feels like most people want to go backward to the way life was before the pandemic. Such a desire lacks the profound joy and truth of the Resurrection which tells us the Risen Jesus isn't where we used to be, he is calling us to something different.

The Risen Jesus appeared to those who had followed him and once they recognized him, he called them to a new ministry. He called Mary Magdalene to proclaim his Resurrection. He called Peter to "feed" and "care for" his followers. He called all his followers to tell of his life, death and Resurrection and baptize anyone who wants into that same Resurrection Life, to make his life, death, and Resurrection ours. The Risen Jesus still comes to us, but not in our past. He appears to us in Resurrection life moments, those moments where we let go of what we accept as "normal" even though normal is often composed of inequality and injustice and really live into that Resurrection Life, sometimes called the Beloved Community.

I've been in Beloved Community before; I know it can and does exist. When I was in seminary, I saw the very conservative campus of Nashotah House transform from stubbornly sticking to a belief that women should not be priests into the community that loved me and supported me the most when I was ordained a priest. In fact, it was the

same people who had once rejected me who gave me my title Mother, which they meant with deep love and respect. And I learned not to judge or "cancel" my colleagues for their different views; instead, I practiced compassion as I learned where their views came from. Both changes created Beloved Community that had room for us all. This transformation didn't happen overnight. It took years and involved suffering and humility. But it was also one of the times I found myself face to face with the Risen Christ. We were living Beloved Community, where we had mutual love and respect for each other, and we felt hope. If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere.

As we celebrate another Easter in this strange way, and as we look to the expectation of returning to in-person parish life and resuming other in-person activities, I pray we will resist the temptation to go back to the way things were just for the sake of comfort and instead look with hopeful joy and courage to what the Risen Christ is calling us to. I'm not saying we won't have church services or ministries. What I'm saying is now we have an opportunity to move forward into worship and ministries that more deeply embody the Beloved Community, the Resurrection Life, and to proclaim through our words, our ministry, our worship, our music that we have seen The Lord and He is Risen!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen Indeed! A L L E L U I A !