

Easter Sunday, Year C, April 21, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

‘[The angels] said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.’ (John 20:13-14)

There is a short liturgy in our prayer book for Holy Saturday morning. It only lasts about five minutes, yet it has a key scene that sets up and intensifies the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The first time I participated in this liturgy, the arc of the Holy Week narrative suddenly had meaning for me in a new way. There was simultaneously more mystery and more joy in the whole arc from Palm Sunday to today. It includes a passage from the Gospel of Matthew that describes Jesus’ burial in the tomb. One of Jesus’ disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ body. Joseph wraps the body in a clean linen cloth according to Jewish burial rites. Joseph, being a rich man, has a new tomb available that has been hewn in rock. He rolls what Matthew describes as a “great stone” to the door of the tomb.

Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”—perhaps Mary of Bethany—are sitting directly opposite the tomb and observe the stone being placed. The next day, the powers that be tell Pilate of their fears that, if the body should be taken out of the tomb, Jesus’ followers will point to Jesus’ own words: “After three days I will rise again,” using them to say to everyone that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Pilate tells the concerned religious officials to use their own guard of soldiers to seal the tomb. The two Marys—and we—are witnesses: the tomb is sealed. No one can get in—or out.

Is it any wonder, then, that when Mary Magdalene sees that the stone is gone, she *runs* to tell Peter and the disciple “whom Jesus loved?” The disciples race back to the tomb, one outrunning the other. Looking inside they see an extraordinary thing. The linen wrappings are lying in the tomb, Jesus’ head wrapping “rolled up in a place by itself.” One disciple sees and believes—yet it is not entirely clear how he interprets what he has seen. John suggests that these disciples still do not quite understand what scripture has foretold. Then they go home. Maybe you, like I, are thinking: how could they do that? Don’t they know what they have just seen? I do not underestimate the power of grief and despair in this instance. They are doing the best they can. Jesus, in his mercy—and perhaps with a bit of humor—hasn’t given up on them yet.

Yet Mary stays, weeping. She is not yet ready to look inside the tomb. When she is able to bring herself to bend down and look in, she sees angels! I think it is significant that they are described as sitting where Jesus had lain: one at the head, and one at the feet. Simultaneously they acknowledge the reality of Jesus’ bodily death, while beautifully framing the tomb’s emptiness. What follows is what I find

to be one of the more moving exchanges between a disciple (and soon to be apostle) and her beloved Teacher.

The angels ask her, “Why are you weeping?” She explains. It is heinous enough that her Lord has been killed. But now, she is not even able to care properly for his body in burial. The fact that it is missing does not come to her as good news, but yet more sorrow. If this scene were filmed, perhaps we would have seen Jesus approaching Mary at the entrance to the tomb, and we are saying under our breaths, “Turn around, Mary, turn around. It’s going to be OK.” Then she turns around and sees Jesus standing there. In her anxiety, she does not know who it is.

I have always loved the way Jesus asks questions. Often it is, “What do you want me to do for you?” or “Why are you afraid?” In this instance it is, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and “Whom are you looking for?” Hopeful for some help from the person she thinks is the gardener, she answers, “Tell me where you have laid him...” Then Jesus says, “Mary!” He calls her by name. She is able to recognize her beloved Teacher at last. There is something about Jesus speaking Mary’s name that calls her back to herself. She is then able to recognize that she has found what she is truly looking for. She sees and hears her Lord face to face.

Among Jesus’ more beloved parables are those having to do with sheep. The Gospel of John has the Parable of the Good Shepherd, especially comforting to children—and the child within us all. Jesus tells the disciples that he is not only the

gate to the sheepfold, but the Good Shepherd. ““Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.’ (John 10:1-4) Mary Magdalene, who has been healed by Jesus, and shows him such deep devotion hears Jesus’ voice.

Whom are you looking for? When Jesus calls you by name, calling you into your truest self, your *resurrected* self, will you, like Mary Magdalene, share the astonishing news that you have seen the Lord? It is in the nature of human beings to want to share good news—especially with family and friends. What is the best news you have shared or heard from someone else? Isn’t there an element of resurrection in these stories? Or, at the very least, affirmation that our hopes have not been in vain. Jesus tells us that worry will not add to our lifespan. We are to trust in God who will array us like flowers and birds as many of us do on Easter morning! Resurrection news, on the other hand, is restorative, life-giving. It gives us a taste of what it is like to live as though eternal life is real and freely available.

In my early twenties I was studying for a degree in music. Earning that degree required that I undergo an oral examination as well as written tests. My

parents, celebrating being empty-nesters I think, were traveling in Norway on a mail boat excursion. It actually took them above the Arctic Circle. When I learned that I had passed my exams, I wanted to tell them. I was still young enough that it was my parents that I wanted to be the first to know. A telephone call wasn't possible. Having more gumption than I have now, I figured out how to send a telegram to them on the boat. My mother said one of the stewards on the boat presented them with a silver tray with my telegram lying on it. It simply said, "I passed." Those were all the words I could afford. This is a mundane example, I know. Yet I felt that I had been recognized as my true self, as a musician. And I found a way to share my joy with my parents. It was a real "Alleluia" moment for me! As Jesus would say, "Go, and do likewise..."