

Expecting to Find Only Death

John 20:1-2, 11-18

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The person who stands in for each one of us in the drama of the first Easter morning is Mary Magdalene. You would think, to this point, that she is a minor figure. The only thing we know about her is that Jesus had healed her. But it is this Mary to whom the risen Jesus first makes himself known. He does not appear to Peter, the loud one, or to John, his favorite, but to a woman whose story no one believes.

When Mary comes to the tomb, she comes expecting to find only death. She goes to the cemetery for the same reason we do: to find some way to feel close to the one who is gone, to rub some salve on the wound, to be alone and cry. Mary stands for us in this story because she is driven not by faith but by grief. She wakes up on Easter morning overwhelmed by her losses; she has lost her teacher, her friend, her hope that God might do something to make the world better, her naïve belief that Jesus' kingdom was real.

Some of us come to church this morning feeling as beat up as Mary. We've lost loved ones in recent months, or we are watching someone hover between life and death. We've lost jobs, or money, or a home. We've buried friendships or dreams. The *New York Times* reported this week that the national mood is "dour," that we are feeling worse than we've felt since the beginning of the Great Recession. Maybe it's gas prices, maybe it's the weather, maybe it's seeing an advanced country like our own brought to its knees by disaster, maybe it's three wars abroad or the war at home between right and center. Or maybe it's our own aches and pains. Whatever it is, there is plenty of hopelessness to go around.

Mary Magdalene is not a symbol of faith. She stands for our hopelessness. She comes to the garden where Jesus is buried while it is still dark, at the end of the Sabbath when she was not allowed to come. She comes as soon as she can to be as close to Jesus as possible, perhaps, as Mark and Luke report, so that she could finish what they could not do before the Sabbath began—anoint the body of Jesus with spices to help preserve it. She came, no doubt, to weep, thinking it would do her good.

But something happened that morning to Mary that changed her life. She began the day standing outside the tomb, crying, but whatever grief she brought to that garden she left behind. She arrived in the dark but left in the light. The one who stood alone in sorrow later ran from that place in joy to tell the good news.

What did Mary find in the garden that turned her tears to joy? Was it a beautiful spring day that made the difference? No. I'm afraid the culture at large assumed that Easter is about spring, about the cycle of seasons, death and rebirth in nature. If our advertisers could retell Mary's story they would show her arriving at the tomb in black and white, then suddenly flowers would push their way through the soil and Technicolor bunnies would appear, leaving delightfully colored eggs in the corners of your screen. Mary, looking a little like Snow White, would smile and announce in a vague New-Agey way, "I have seen the Lord!" I enjoy spring—and can't wait for it to come to Block Island—and I enjoy Easter eggs, especially the chocolate ones, but this is not the message of Easter. It was not a beautiful day that changed Mary's life.

What did she find in the garden that turned her tears to joy? Was it the empty tomb? No. When Mary saw the stone rolled away, she assumed the grave had been robbed. It wasn't that

uncommon in ancient Palestine. Mary went and told the disciples that someone had taken the body of the dead Jesus. It only made her grief worse. Some people point to the empty tomb as if it proves something, but it didn't prove anything to Mary. The gospels make it clear that you can look that fact in the face and it will make no difference until Jesus speaks to you personally.

What did Mary find that turned her tears to joy? Was it the angels? She saw two angels in the tomb dressed in white where Jesus had been laid, and they even spoke to her, but it made no difference. She kept on crying. Angels can even speak to you but nothing happens until Jesus calls your name.

What did Mary find? Was it the doctrine of the resurrection that turned her around? Some Easter sermons I've heard are so rational in arguing for the resurrection that you'd think that some theologian met Mary at the tomb and talked her into believing. That's not what happened. You can know about the resurrection and not experience its power. You can know about Jesus and not know Jesus. It's the difference between knowing about love and falling in love. Even John's gospel, which has so much to say about believing in Jesus, does not in the end ask us the question "Do you believe," but rather, "Have you encountered the risen Christ?"

What did Mary find that turned her tears to joy? Did she find hope in hope itself? Did she arrive at the tomb and think, "There's got to be an up side to this. I need to have a more positive attitude"? No. Left to her own thinking, Mary would still be crying. She did not lift herself out of despair.

Neither did Mary make a decision to believe in Jesus' message and tell the others that the truth that Jesus taught still lives on. Some scholars argue that Jesus' followers discovered after Jesus' death that the community of believers—which they called the body of Christ—had a life of its own, so they invented the story of the resurrection as a way to express that. But the truth is that the others were just like Mary—crushed, disappointed, thinking that if Jesus died he was not the Messiah after all. Some of them went into hiding. Some went fishing. They did not sit around talking about the dead man and get a warm feeling which they named the Spirit. No, they sank into depression. It was only when they encountered Jesus alive again, that a community of believers was born.

What Mary found in the garden that turned her tears to joy was not an idea, not a doctrine, but a living person who called her name. Mary stood there crying. She turned and saw Jesus standing there. It may be that she was still facing the empty tomb and simply glanced back over her shoulder at a man standing there. But she was so far from expecting to see Jesus alive that she did not even recognize him. Jesus asked her, "Miss, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" Still she thought he was just the landscape guy working at the cemetery. Apparently you can look right at Jesus and not recognize him until he chooses to make himself known to you.

Mary says to the landscape guy, "If you're the one who took his body away, please tell me where you put him and I'll go get him," as if she could singlehandedly carry a corpse.

Then comes one of the tenderest moments in all of Scripture. Everything changes in an instant. Jesus says to her, "Mary!" He calls her by name and in an instant she knows that it is her Lord and that he is alive. Jesus had said, "the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name...the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3,4).

Mary turns toward him and says in Aramaic, "Rabboni," my master, my great one—not just a title, but a relationship. *My* master. It was at that moment that she saw Jesus and knew who he was, and knew how he loved her, and that made all the difference.

The old gospel song is based on this story:

*I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.
And he walks with me
And he talks with me
And he tells me I am his own.* [C. Austin Miles]

That's the most important thing, isn't it? Not just that he tells me he is alive, but that he tells me I am his own. He calls my name, and I know that he loves me and has claimed me and had drawn me to himself in grace.

Some of you came here this Easter morning like Mary, expecting to find only dead things. All of this that we call worship you may see as an exercise in tradition and history. Perhaps you come from some sense of duty, or some sense that this medicine will be good for you, but you really expect the songs and the scripture and certainly the sermon to be dead. But Jesus may surprise you today in the midst of these dead things. He may speak to you and call your name. May you hear his voice and respond.