

## ***With Mary, Waiting for the Spirit***

Acts 1:1-14

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

May 12, 2013, Mother's Day/Ascension

I don't know anything about what it's like to be a mother. All my experience of mother has been on the receiving end, not the giving end. Even less do I understand what it would be like to be the mother of Jesus. But today I am thinking about what it would have been like to be in her situation.

Today, the Sunday after the day the risen Jesus ascended or returned to the Father, forty days after Easter, is also ten days before Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit descended onto the first believers. The first 14 verses of the book of Acts are a suggested reading for this Sunday, and I find that they not only tell the story of the ascension but also talk about waiting. The gospel of Luke ends with Jesus telling his followers to "tarry" in Jerusalem, to wait until the promise came true that they would be "clothed with power from on high." Acts picks up right there, with Jesus telling the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the Father's promise, when they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

But here is what jumps out at me on Mother's Day: The apostles gather in an upstairs room, and their names are listed. But Luke adds: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus." It should not surprise us that there were women in that upper room, even if Luke is not bold enough to call them apostles. And it should not surprise us that Mary would be there, having said goodbye again to her son, with some mixture of grief and expectation.

But there is still something touching about the image of Jesus' mother gathered with her son's friends, waiting for his spirit to return. We have not seen Mary since she stood at the foot of the cross watching her son die. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks to her from the cross, and nodding toward John the beloved disciple says, "Woman, behold your son." To John he says, "Behold your mother," and we are told that John took her into his home.

The image of Mary that comes to mind this Mother's Day is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, that magnificent sculpture that sits in Saint Peter's in Rome, with Mary holding the body of the dead Jesus stretched across her lap. Who can bear even to look upon such sorrow, even in marble? The sculptor created that piece when he was only 24; I cannot fathom that. Some of you will remember that the sculpture traveled from Rome to New York in 1964 for the Vatican Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. I haven't been able to find it on the web, but I remember watching a television broadcast when I was 11 years old which was nothing but cameras circling the *Pietà* without words, with solemn instrumental music in the background. I don't know how long that lasted, but in my memory it was just Jesus and Mary for half an hour. I was transfixed. I didn't know anything about Michelangelo and I had been taught to be suspicious of Catholics. But I knew about Mary and Jesus—I loved Jesus—

and I could imagine my mother holding my dead body in her lap. You don't have to believe any special doctrine about Mary in order to understand that sculpture, or to let your heart be broken by the gospel of John or any of the thousands of paintings of Jesus being taken down from the cross and given to his mother.

To Catholics, at least, it must seem odd that in the gospels Mary appears at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and at the end but nowhere in between. In John's gospel she is present at the first miracle, at the wedding in Cana, and then is not seen until the cross. And at that miracle, Jesus is testy with her, saying something like "Ma'am, what is it you think our relationship is, that you would order me to do a miracle? I'm on my own schedule." In Mark's gospel, Mary and Jesus' brothers go out to restrain him early in his ministry. They want to take him back home to safety because they thought he was out of his mind. Jesus, in words that must have seemed cruel, said to the students at his feet, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Those who do the will of God."

Those of us who have watched our children grow up and inevitably go away can understand a little of the tension of letting go and wanting to hold on. There is both joy and sadness in seeing your baby on his or her own. Mary disappears from Jesus' story, as we all move to the margins at best in the stories of our children.

Luke's gospel is in a sense the gospel of Mary because she figures so prominently in the first two chapters—notably the Annunciation, the Visitation, the *Magnificat*, and the Nativity. But then in even in Luke Mary disappears from the story. Luke doesn't even mention her at the cross. He doesn't mention her until the first chapter of Acts.

Then there is the matter of Easter. Has it ever occurred to you that Mary is not mentioned in any of the Resurrection stories? She does not appear in the list that Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15 of all the people Jesus appeared to—even though he appeared to more than 500 at one time. The gospels are clear that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, not to his mother. Catholic scholars, especially, wonder how this could be so. Would he go first to his lady friend and not his grieving mother?

There are scholarly tricks to get around this. Although it is not church doctrine, some Catholics including John Paul II have believed that Jesus must have appeared to his mother first in spite of what the gospels say, perhaps even before the stone was rolled away. If he could descend to hell, he could go to his mother's house. A few have argued that when the gospel writers say that Mary the mother of James or Mary the wife of Clopas went to the tomb on Easter morning, they really mean that it was Jesus' mother—that his half-brother was James, and that Clopas was her second husband, and that it was not proper to refer to a mother by the name of her deceased son.

I take the gospels at face value. If Jesus' mother had been the first to see him, I'm sure they would have considered that an important part of the story. If you take them at face value, here is what you are left with: Mary saw Jesus die, but we do not know that she ever saw him resurrected. The next time we meet her in the Bible, she is waiting in the upper room for the Spirit, the Comforter

and Igniter the Father will send—the Spirit who is also the spirit of Jesus and the presence of her Son in the church today.

That's the Mary I want to place before you today, because she represents us. Like Mary, we are ones who loved Jesus but to whom the Risen One has not appeared. Like Mary, our role is to wait. We wait for his Spirit, invisible, to come into our lives. Next Sunday we will celebrate the arrival of that Spirit as wind and fire and word and power, but for now we center ourselves on the attitude of waiting.

Does anybody like to wait? We are all impatient—tempted to open even Mother's Day gifts before the big day. We spoil our own Christmases by peeking at the presents. In the first chapter of Acts, the opening question of the disciples to Jesus shows both their misunderstanding and their lack of patience: "Lord, is this the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Are we there yet? Is this the moment we've been waiting for? Are you going to kick the Romans out and make Israel great again? Jesus tells them, "It's not for you to know." Don't worry about that stuff. Focus on the Spirit I have promised to give you and the task of being witnesses to what God has done through me.

Over and over the letters to the early Christians stress the virtue of patience. Faith in Christ and patience in waiting for him are so close as to be almost identical. Hebrews 6:12 says, "Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." One of Jesus' less famous parables is the one I call The Parable of the Patient Farmer in Mark 4:26-29. He says, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens." What does the farmer do? He waits.

Waiting was a Jewish thing long before it became a Christian thing. The psalms teach us that waiting on the Lord to act was at the heart of faith. Listen to these verses:

- I wait for Yahweh, my soul waits for him, I rely on his promise. (Psalm 130:5 JB)
- Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27:14 NIV)
- For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. (Psalm 62:5 NRSV)
- Be still in the presence of the Lord and wait patiently for him to act. (Psalm 37:7 NLT)
- Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. (Isaiah 40:31)

So we wait in this room along with Mary. We wait as those who have loved Jesus but to whom he has not appeared. We long to see him. We long to feel his presence. He has promised us that God will send a Spirit who will bring him back to our memories and we will remember everything he ever said to us. The Spirit will teach us as Jesus would teach us, and our hearts will burn

within us. Simone Weil (vare) said, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

So we wait gathered with others who see nothing, hear nothing, but wait for God to speak or appear in power. As the prophet Elijah experienced, sometimes Yahweh is not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake, but in the still voice of silence. So we are quiet. We listen. And we wait.

During World War Two, a pilot was on his way back to England after a mission against the Nazis on the mainland. He was running low on fuel and was concerned that he might not make it back. He had turned off his radio to elude his pursuers. As he crossed the English Channel, he turned it back on again and began turning the dial to find the ever-changing proper frequency. He needed the proper frequency to guide him to a landing strip. He strained to hear the signal over the roar of the giant engine. As he turned the radio dial, he broke out in a cold fearful sweat. Finally, after intently listening for what seemed like an eternity, he heard a faint signal. He immediately changed his flight path toward the radio transmission, and before long landed safely. [John Killinger, "Finding God in a Busy World," Preaching Today, Tape No. 132.]

Here with Mary in this upper room we wait, listening for a faint signal from afar. Perhaps the Spirit will come in a mighty wind. Perhaps in a gentle breeze. We wait for either, not telling God how to act. Christina Rossetti wrote:

Who has seen the wind?

Neither I nor you:

But when the leaves hang trembling,

The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I:

But when the trees bow down their heads,

The wind is passing by.