

“Becoming a Body” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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Easter

Scripture: John 20: 1-18 (Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus at the tomb)

Although Easter is celebrated with bright colors, joyful music and triumphal imagery, the story actually begins in darkness and it stays fairly shadowy throughout the next fifty days, until Pentecost. Resurrection remains a mystery during that time.

Nobody sees what happens inside the tomb. The light that Jesus was for his disciples has been snuffed out, dead and buried. They do not know what will happen next.

Mary Magdalene comes alone in the dark, wrapped in her grief. She can see that the stone has been rolled away. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener; then recognizes him when he calls her by name. But when she reaches out for him, he stops her: “Don’t touch me,” according to one translation, or “Don’t hold on to me,” according to another.

Would her touch hold him back? Or would holding on to his physical presence hinder her from taking the next step on her spiritual path? I think the ambiguity is intended. It suggests to me that they each had work to do, and would need to recognize that the earlier form of their relationship was finished. Old ways were done. Something new is about to happen.

“Go and tell my disciples,” he says. Bear witness, at a time when no woman could be a credible witness for a company of men. And so we glimpse the new order, the new covenant, the meaning of resurrection for the followers of Jesus. In this gospel, Mary Magdalene is called and sent as the first witness to the resurrection.

This is the first resurrection appearance of four in the Gospel of John. A week later, Jesus will suddenly appear to his disciples, apparently moving through locked doors. Then he comes again, so that Thomas (who was missing from the earlier visit), could touch his wounds and believe that this was the same Jesus who had been crucified. And finally, he appears to Peter and some other disciples after a fruitless night of fishing. We’ll hear more about those encounters in the next few weeks.

In all four of these appearances, Jesus is able to speak, to eat and be touched, as he was before the crucifixion. And yet this Jesus appears and disappears. Both Peter and Mary Magdalene struggle to recognize him. Luke tells a similar story about the couple walking to Emmaus. So there is something mysterious and ephemeral about Jesus in this new form. This is a resurrection body, not simply resuscitation of his physical body.

For me, the story of Mary Magdalene is an invitation to the fragile and tender space of a new revelation, which moves us from a focus on the person of Jesus toward the mysterious presence of his spirit at the heart of every collected “body of Christ.” His presence helps to make the intricate connections that any body must have. That is one way to understand this precarious period between Easter and Pentecost, which marks the birth of the church. We could think of this period as the gestation of Christ’s body. And gestation usually happens in the dark.

John. Biblical scholars think that the Gospel of John was

written for a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles about 70 years after the death of Jesus, and some 30 years after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, expelling all the Jews and leaving the early church without its physical center. By then, Paul was already traveling around the Mediterranean, preaching the risen Christ as a way to understand how the singular God of Jewish history could have been manifested on earth by a single man who had been shamefully crucified. Remembering that Paul never met Jesus in person, his emphasis on the Risen Christ makes sense. For Paul, Christ as a life-giving and life-changing spiritual presence.

Raymond Brown, the Jesuit scholar who specialized in this gospel, suggests that the Gospel of John was written for the early church in Ephesus, a cosmopolitan trading city on the western coast of Turkey, where Paul had already gathered a small community of believers. You might read Paul's letter to the Ephesians as background for the Gospel of John. Many of the same themes appear, particularly the imagery of day and night, darkness and light.

The Gospel of John is a well-constructed story, full of theatrical lighting and visual metaphors which would convey the spiritual presence of the Risen Christ, rather than the emphasis on the earthly ministry of Jesus which we see in Mark, Matthew and Luke. We do catch glimpses of Mary Magdalene in all four gospels, as a faithful disciple. In spite of the common assumption that she was a prostitute (for which there is no evidence), we don't actually know much about her, except that Jesus had healed her of seven demons and that she might have been a woman of wealth, because she and some other women traveled with the disciples, supporting them "from their means." (Luke 8:1-3)

Call. I hear this encounter at the tomb as a challenge and a new call to take leadership in a new kind of community, where women would be valued along with the men.. "Go and tell the disciples what you have seen and heard," he said. Bear witness

to the empty tomb and the reality of my presence with you. Become who you are called to be now! Move from “me” to “we.”

Today, I want to bear witness to a man in our own time who said “Yes” to such a call.

Solomon Mahlangu, whom we knew as Solly, was a modest man, a quiet man, who gave his life for the discarded young people of Winterveld, in South Africa. His call grew out of the racial turmoil in South Africa, and the seemingly miraculous movement toward racial reconciliation initiated by Nelson Mandela.

In 1990, when Mandela was released from prison on Robbin Island, Solly was just 15 years old, living with his parents in Winterveld, a black township outside of Pretoria. During the Apartheid Era, people of many different tribes were uprooted and moved onto these “reservations” because they were not allowed to live in white areas of the city. Although Solly’s father was a respected tribal elder, the social fabric of their lives had been stripped away. Solly grew up in Winterveld, amid the poverty, illiteracy and crime that happens when tribal lands and customs are destroyed with nothing but exploitation and violence in their place.

In 1993, Mandela and FW de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, for their cooperation in forging a peaceful end to Apartheid in South Africa, and yet we know that violence was common everywhere. A year later, Mandela was elected President of South Africa, the first elections that the majority black population could vote. That year, Roy Barber made his first visit to Winterveld, with a Growing Edge grant from Seekers. Solly was 19 years old then.

When Roy went back to South Africa with another Growing Edge grant in 1996, and again in the year 2000, Solly was one of the young people drawn to Roy’s interest in theater as a means of social change.

Over time, Roy and Leslie Jacobsen, from the Drama Department

at George Washington University, began to develop a partnership with Solly and others who were offering leadership among the youth who wanted a future for themselves. As I remember, it was Solly's father who gave the land on which the Bokamoso Youth Centre now stands. The name, Bokamoso, means FUTURE in Tswana, which many of the young people speak.

For the past ten years or so, Solly has accompanied a changing group of 12 young people from Bokamoso, who come to the States in January, for a series of fundraising events to help themselves and others access post-secondary education. He was proud that Bokamoso included gay and transgender participants. Over time, his steady presence has been an anchor for them. His example, a guide for them.

Last week, at the age of 39, Solly suffered a massive heart attack and died, leaving a wife and two children.

Yesterday, his funeral was held in Winterveld. Kathy Tobias reported that more than 2,000 people were present. We are grateful that Roy Barber was there, to give a eulogy, to honor the life and work of this courageous and unassuming servant leader.

And so, with Mary Magdalene, we stand by another tomb in our own time, to acknowledge the power and presence of a man who gave his life so that others might live. It isn't that Solly set out to be this kind of leader. It happened one step at a time, as he said "Yes" to the situation in front of him.

Now, like the early disciples, the community in and around the Bokamoso Youth Centre will experience a dark time, when some of the seeds of new life will sprout new leaves and push their way into being. And some will wither away. It is a call that comes again and again, in every generation, to offer what we can toward forming another "body of Christ."

Seekers. Although the music of Easter morning often sounds triumphant and glad, I want to leave you with this thought –

that the Easter season, between this morning and Pentecost, is actually a fragile and tender time when the signs of new life and new connections need to be protected and nurtured with hope, and joy, and gentleness.

Initially, God's call comes to each of us, as individuals, to be open to God's healing and wholeness. I think the three-year apprenticeship that Jesus offered his disciples is a fairly short time for this hard work, of self-examination and learning how to love people who are radically different from ourselves. Many of us are doing that part-time, in and around the struggle to earn a living.

Then there is a second call, like the one Mary Magdalene heard at the tomb – to grow beyond our separateness into becoming a functional body of Christ, in this time and place – to let ourselves learn the sometimes difficult lessons of loving one another as Jesus loved his disciples, teaching them how to be a body of Christ after he was gone. I think this call happens again and again, throughout our lives. Resurrection is an ongoing revelation, not a one-time event.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul describes the community as a body in a way that I find helpful. In Ephesians 4: 15-16, we read:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The time will always come when the teacher dies. And we face a choice about whether to turn away from this path of learning how to love as Jesus loved his disciples, or to move deeper into a life of call and service, tending the filaments of connection that allow us to bring our special gifts for the good of the whole.

That's what Mary did, as she made her way from the tomb, into an unknown future.

She chose in. Solly chose in. We can too.

Amen.