

“Grief and Revelation” by Pat Conover

April 27, 2014

The Second Sunday of Easter

Mark's gospel was written ten to twenty years before Matthew and Luke who added on appearance stories and resurrection stories to communicate their theologies of atonement and a future Judgment Day when God would punish enemies and bring in a fully realized realm of God on Earth, led by the return of Jesus as Messiah. Mark can fairly be read as in being in harmony with Matthew and Luke but his story focuses on the experience of three women who are responding to the death, not the resurrection, of Jesus.

There are many existing manuscripts of Mark dating from the Seventh Century c.e. and later. The earliest and most numerous manuscripts end at verse 8. Verses 9-19 are found in some manuscripts and can be summarized as representing language inserted from Matthew or Luke.

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee: and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of

Arithmathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb." When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised: he is not here. Look, here is the place they laid him. But go, tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. [Mark 15:40 to 16:8, Fourth Edition of the New Revised Standard Version]

I'm building on the Mark story because it focuses on the human reality of the death of Jesus. The promise of an appearance of Jesus in Galilee can be thought of as a vision.

I was spiritually and emotionally gripped by the painting *The Pieta of Avignon* when we toured the home and museum of the Ecuadoran artist Oswald Guayasamin. It is a large painting, the only one on a wall in an alcove set aside for the painting. There was a comfortable bench for seeing and meditating. I took my time there.

The painting closely references one of the most famous paintings of the Middle Ages, the Fifteenth Century painting of Enguerrand Quarton in the Dutch Realist tradition. There are a number of not so subtle changes by Guayasamin that take the painting out of a churchy context, that focus on the event of grief. The Fifteenth Century painting is restrained and pious. The genitals of Jesus are covered. In Guayasamin's 1980 painting Jesus is ugly dead and the focus is on three women in grief. The Fifteenth Century painting includes a feminine image of St John. Mark tells of two Marys and Salome. I understand the three women pictured by Guayasamin to be Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and John, two of the closest followers of Jesus.

Skipping past artistic and biblical detail in a picture of an event not described in the Bible, we get to what probably happened in fact. Guayasamin's painting follows Quarton in depicting the Jewish tradition that women handled and prepared the body of the dead for burial. We can follow Guayasamin into the terribleness, the ugliness, of the death of Jesus, can follow Guayasamin into three experiences of grief by three women who knew Jesus well, who loved Jesus each in their own way. Matthew and Luke rush past the experience of the death of Jesus to focus on their speculations concerning "Resurrected Jesus." Most of us follow along, rushing to Easter as the good news that Jesus didn't really die. Everything was not okay for these three women and everything is not okay here and now.

If we are to be saved by the good news of Jesus we have to be saved before everything is okay. If we deny and avoid and escape from all the grief over what is wrong, over all that is lost right or wrong, we miss the insight and appreciation that comes with completing grief.

Think of what those women had to work through to complete their grief.

Think about the grief you have completed and avoided.

When the feeling of loss, anger, remorse, hopelessness, and depression are completed we have the gift of what endures, what is true, what matters. The three women, the other close followers of Jesus, those who knew Jesus most closely, who had invested the most in direct love and friendship with Jesus, those who had embodied the guidance of Jesus in their relationships with Jesus, who had turned the guidance of Jesus into habits to live by, who carried the inspiration and not merely the truth of what Jesus said and did, discovered that they had empowering memories and hope. Their memories and hope were part of their bodies, part of the whole brain patterns that make them and us human.

They could and did carry forward with what was theirs to say, what was theirs to do. They walked through the doors Jesus had opened for them to their own experience of the Divine Presence, guidance and empowerment for them, guidance and empowerment for us.

The salvation offered by Jesus is salvation that stands up in the hardest of hard times. It isn't about everything being great because we are saved. It is about salvation before everything has been made right, right for us, right for our families, right for our companions, right for Seekers, right for the world. Thank goodness this is true. Otherwise we couldn't be saved at all.

If we skip over the grief we skip what freed and transformed

the close followers of Jesus after his ugly, shameful, powerless, brutal, and hostile death; if we skip over the grief that is ours to bear; we skip the healing, the lessons, the comfort, the mutuality, the empowerment, the thankfulness, that comes with completed grief.

Our culture has lots of therapies, advice, and distractions to help us to skip by grief. We make it easy on ourselves and each other by saying things like "My mother has passed away, my father has gone on to a better place, my baby is resting the lap of Jesus." We can take our grief and pain in measurable doses, but until we have licked the pot clean we are not fully open to the thankfulness for what remains and why it matters so much to us.

I woke up with a poem recently, referenced at least in part to Mary Magdalene in the Guayasamin painting, the one with the golden towel to gather her tears. I've asked John Morris to read it.

The Traveler

It had been a good season. She had added six squirrel skins. They were still smelly but she didn't care. They helped to keep her feet and ankles warm and she always felt cold.

Because she was so cold, she kept adding on a skin here, a piece of cloth there. She knew it made her look odd. She didn't care about looking odd because she felt so cold.

Because she was so cold, she kept her arms wrapped around herself and that made it hard to do things, like catching squirrels.

Because she was so cold, she didn't take baths or shower. She knew it made her smell bad. Since she already smelled bad, she didn't worry about the squirrel skins being smelly. And, because she didn't take baths or showers her toe nails were hard and she didn't cut them. That made her toes hurt and so

she didn't want to walk, and, when she did walk, it hurt.

And they looked at her and said, "She is smelly and she doesn't care."

And they looked at her and said, "She looks funny and she doesn't care."

And they looked at her and said, "She doesn't work, she doesn't help, she doesn't smile, she doesn't look at us, she doesn't talk to us."

She heard them talk about her and what they said was true. She cared. She didn't change.

She was glad they didn't kill her. She was glad that they left her enough food to stay alive

.....without coming close.

She didn't like eating, but she ate.

It was because of the Traveler. "Damn his eyes." "Love his eyes."

She had been young and willing. He had chosen her. He met her need. She met his need. Before they shared, he told her he would be leaving because he traveled. That is what he did. He traveled. She didn't care that he would leave because he was there. Really there. Not just a dream. "Damn his eyes." "Love his eyes."

He told the truth. Their coupling was filled with truth. She remembered. "Damn his eyes." "Love his eyes."

When he left she could have gone with him. She stayed. She staid. She couldn't imagine going where he went, giving what he gave, taking what he took. Once was enough. Except that once wasn't enough. "Love his eyes." "Damn his eyes."

Sometimes she watched ice melt, but she did not melt.

Sometimes she watched a seed deep in the dark soil. She saw it clearly. It was at peace. It didn't grow. Then she noticed that the skin of the seed was softening and had little holes, holes too small to see and yet she saw them.

She watched ice melt and she cried. Then she wailed. "Damn his eye." "Love his eyes."

The seed was giving up and letting in what seeds need, deep in the dark soil.

And they said, "Maybe she is dying." They didn't know what to do. But they left her a little food in case she didn't die.

She didn't die.

Instead of dying she smiled.

They said, "She is smiling." They were surprised that they cared because they had mostly forgotten about her..

She was smiling because she saw his eyes. "Damn his eyes." "Love his eyes." She had followed her journey, not his journey. She had found him, well, at least she had found his eyes.

She couldn't hold him. But he held her. She felt warmer.

Because she felt warmer she took off the smelly squirrel skins. She took off her smelly clothes. She took a hot bath, a long hot bath, a long hot bubble bath. After awhile she felt cleaner, warmer still.

Her toe nails were soft and she could cut them. She cut them. She walked around, albeit a bit feebly. Because her arms were no longer wrapped around herself she started doing things, little things like planting seeds because she liked seeds.

They said, "She doesn't smell bad. She isn't wearing smelly clothes. She is naked. She is weak. She is doing things. She

is smiling. She didn't die. That is a lot for her." They left her some food and some new clothes.

She ate the food. She put on the clothes. She told them about his eyes. "Love his eyes."

Mary Magdalene holds the communion cup in her left hand.

I repeat two-and-a-half verses from our lectionary reading, from the twentieth chapter of the Gospel According to John:

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Grief clears away a lot of distractions in our memories until we remember what matters most. When the memories of the close followers of Jesus cleared they were able to discern the Divine Presence Jesus had incarnated, had made visibly present in human form. They could see the Divine Presence in each other and claim it in themselves as what mattered most. We to can see and talk about Seekers as the Body of Christ.

The experience of spiritual solidarity in the midst of all our unreadiness, all our confusions, all our unhappiness, all our depressions, all our griefs, makes clear that we can be spiritually empowered even in our hardest times. We can embody the Divine Presence before we are saints. Experience of spiritual solidarity offers hope that the future can be radically different, radically better, despite all the signs to the contrary. Without spiritual solidarity, including grief as well as our celebrations, we are likely to feel lonely, a little crazy. I still grieve over Kate and others who are no longer part of our gathered community.

When have you experienced grief and what did you learn from it? What did it heal for you?

What are you grieving now, perhaps once in awhile, perhaps glancingly? What is helping you engage your grief .

Are you avoiding a grief? Are you hiding out from completing a grief? What will you not give up in your grief to get to what matters most for you? Can you wail or do you insist on tidy grief?

Jesus said, "Peace be with you." When your grief is done you get some peace where you need it most.