

“While it was Still Dark” by Marjory Bankson

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Easter

“While it was still dark,” John’s gospel reminds us, Mary Magdalene made her way to the cave where the crucified body of Jesus had been sealed behind a huge stone. What she hoped to accomplish is not clear. I would guess she was drawn by love to keep a vigil there.

When I don’t know what else to do, I would simply say BE THERE.

We know very little about Mary of Magdala, except that she was a Galilean, which means she came from Jesus’ home territory, in the hilly country north of Samaria, rather than from Jerusalem where the crucifixion had taken place.

Luke tells us that Mary Magdalene had been healed “of seven demons” and that she followed Jesus with several other women who “used their own resources to provide for Jesus and his disciples.” In other words, she had some wealth and independence about how to share it. She was no novice, no recent convert. Mary had deepened her discipleship enough to join the community with her energy and money.

Earlier in John’s description of this tumultuous week, Mary Magdalene is seen at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus die an agonizing and humiliating death in the company of his mother, Mary, two other women and only one male disciple, John. The others may have been scattered in the crowd but they are not mentioned. Only the women and John seem loyal enough and brave enough to be identified publically with Jesus on the cross – because crucifixion was an intentional political warning by the Roman authorities against Jewish rebellion. Only the Gospel of John contains the scene in which Jesus commends John and Mary to each other, as though passing the baton of familial relationship to them at his death. The encounter with Mary Magdalene at the tomb is also unique to this Gospel, which came out of the Johannine community about 70 years after Jesus’ death. It was not an eye-witness account. Instead, this story is an intentional portrayal of the mystery of Jesus’ presence that the disciples experienced following his gruesome death.

Mark tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene watched while Joseph of Arimathea took his body, wrapped it with linen and spices, placed it in an unused cave and rolled a heavy stone in place to seal it. John brings in Nicodemus to help with Jesus’ burial – the same Pharisee who

had come to Jesus in secret to ask about the source of his power. This detail reminds us that Jesus told Nicodemus that one must “be born again” to enter the Kingdom of God. After the crucifixion, Nicodemus must have wrapped Jesus’ body with a heavy heart, wondering still, “How did this happen? Couldn’t he have saved himself? Was he the Messiah?”

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb with her own despair and her own questions.

When she found that the heavy stone had been rolled away, leaving the mouth of the cave wide open like a gaping garage door, Mary turned and ran back to where the disciples were huddled in grief. “Come quickly,” we can almost hear her cry, “They’ve stolen his body!”

Peter and another disciple (presumably John) come running and go into the tomb, where they see the wrapping cloths scattered about, but no sign of Jesus’ body. Unlike the story of Lazarus, (which is also found only in John) there is no body to be revived. There is no Martha to remind us that the body would be stinking after three days. There is no community gathered round, directed to unbind Jesus. Instead, we have some clues that something quite different has happened to Jesus – the head cloth is folded and placed away from the strewn body wrappings; the tomb is wide open.

But the male disciples didn’t get the divine message. Instead, they turn away from Mary and simply go back home. She stays, glued by grief. Here ends the first scene in the drama of resurrection: a gaping hole in the morning darkness, a missing

body, scattered grave-cloths and no clear sense about what comes next.

Have you ever been in that situation? Confronted by a big dark empty space that was supposed to be full of meaning? Shattered by a sudden death? A major shift of location? Loss of a job? Diagnosis of a serious illness? Retirement? Even something you worked hard for, like sobriety – or an empty nest? Have you wakened in the night, worrying about something you cannot control or fix? Are there scattered clues, like the discarded grave-cloths, that something different is possible – even if you can't imagine what it might be? Our culture offers many ways to fill up those empty spaces, but our faith story invites a different approach. To stop! Look! And listen!

Scene Two

Last Tuesday night, Jackie Wallen shared a poem by the novelist, John Updike, with Learners & Teachers. It was a poem about this encounter with Jesus by Mary Magdalene. "Don't spiritualize it," Updike says, "Make the rock solid and the cave dank, the angels fierce, with rough tunics and strong speech. Let it LIVE in you."

Come with me then, to the rocky landscape, barely visible as the sky begins to pale. After the others leave, Mary enters the cave herself. She sees two angels, sitting where Jesus' body would have been. Did they just arrived? Had they been there before? Was she crazy?

“Woman, why are you crying?” The question is kindly, but generic. They are guardians, not killers; messengers, signaling something special.

“They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!” In this simple statement, we hear no fear or accusation – just a question. Then someone approaches and she turns. “Sir, if you took him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

“Mary,” he says – and suddenly she knows who it is.

His voice. Her name. Her doubts disappear. Her vision clears and she knows he is not dead and gone, but alive and close. “Teacher!” she cries in aramaic, reaching toward him with a clear YES in time and space. This is no spiritualized “Christ of faith,” but a physical experience of Jesus, as real and close as before. In their exchange of names, a bridge is thrown over the abyss between NOW and THEN. Mary Magdalene herself enters into the sacred realm of resurrection. By her response, Mary is healed once again, by his word and hers. Call and response, here and now.

We are reminded of the opening lines of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” By hearing her name and responding, Mary herself becomes a child of God as promised in the Prologue. She is indeed “born again,” ready for a new call, a new reality, a new partnership with Jesus IF she will give herself to it.

My experience has been that IF we can resist the temptation to take one look and go back home, disappointed, Jesus is waiting – to call us by name, to awaken our hearts and heal our demons. Scholars are fond of separating the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, but this story of Mary Magdalene points toward a third way, toward an experience of Jesus in this world, healing and guiding still.

Two brief stories. Each year, when we go to Guatemala, we visit the church where Fr. Stan Rother was martyred in 1981, about the same time that Bishop Romero was killed in Salvador. Stan was a friend of Henri Nouwen and his life was taken by government assassins because he was teaching his Mayan parishioners that they too were beloved children of God. The sacristy, where he was murdered, has become a small chapel where people still come to pray, to pour out their griefs and be inspired to continue their struggle for recognition and respect. They meet Jesus, or the living spirit of their beloved priest, in that sacred spot. More than a hundred people from that parish were killed or disappeared during the Guatemalan civil war which ended with a Peace Accord in 1996. When I stand in that place, and witness the devotion of those people, their courage stirs my soul and quickens my spirit for the work that God has carved out here for me. That piece of the pilgrimage is one reason I am still committed to keeping the pilgrimage alive and available for others.

Closer to home, I'm being reminded that sometimes there is good work to be done, but it doesn't have your name on it. That too demands discernment. For the past six months, I have been meeting every other Saturday morning with a group at the Potter's House, to facilitate the emergence of a new spiritual community and a new decision-making structure there. Every day, as I prayed about that work, I listened for my name to be

spoken. I have been faithfully keeping watch by that “empty tomb,” hoping for resurrection – and that is happening. But in the silence of my vigil, I’ve heard a clear answer to my own question of involvement:

“No, that is not your call now.” Yesterday I finished my work there. As we completed the list of questions which we had set forth together, I handed those sheets of newsprint to Shelley Marcus, grateful that she has been called to the Potter’s House for this work. Saying NO is sometimes the faithful response.

Scene Three

When Mary Magdalene heard her name spoken in the early light of dawn, and she recognized Jesus, he stopped the flow of her response and turned it in a new direction.

“Don’t hold on to me,” he says firmly, “for I have not ascended to my Father.” There is a suggestion here that she could have held him back. Or that she could have sabotaged the call he was about to give her by hanging onto the past, clinging to the relationship which they had had before his physical death. That, of course, was the story explored by the Da Vinci Code, but the biblical story is different. In John’s Gospel, Mary does pull back and wait for guidance, knowing this is a different reality, a resurrection experience that has further meaning.

“Go and tell my disciples what you have seen and heard.” That

is, do NOT keep this as a private revelation. News of this new form, of Jesus as a mystical presence, is to be shared. And that makes Mary the first apostle, the first witness to the resurrection and thus the spiritual Mother of the church. What a stunning difference would it have made for the soul of Christianity to revere Mary Magdalene, as well as Peter, as the founder of the church?

Here at Seekers we do expect the Spirit of God to quicken the lives of men and women. We do value the inward journey of waiting and listening, as well as the outward journey of love and justice. And yet we come this morning with our share of doubts and fears that Jesus will not be there when we come to the tomb in our grief or when we cry out for help.

One last image.

Take time this week to STOP! LOOK! And LISTEN! All around us, the natural world is brimming with resurrection stories. Those bare, dead branches and flying seeds of Fall are now bursting with color and new life everywhere we look. For too long, living creatures have been separated from that resurrection story in nature. We know that when any living creature dies, it decomposes. Death is final for us, and our modern sensibilities strain at talk of triumph over death, even on Easter morning. We smile at talk of End Times, roll our eyes at talk of an apocalypse – except those we create ourselves. We wonder about people who will not consider cremation because they expect our physical bodies to be revived and hang on to every shred of physical existence in spite of imagined bliss in the next life.

But I believe the story of Mary Magdalene and the empty tomb is a story of rebirth in the rock-hard reality of this world. Mary shows us the way to embrace the mystical realm that shines through our physical bodies, gives us hope when the evidence points to despair. In a strange way, Mary's story could help to reroot our faith tradition in the natural world – where signs of resurrection abound. Call and response can change the course of human history.

Let me close with the words of our reflection paragraph:

The story begins when God puts on flesh and comes to walk among us.

It ends, or perhaps it just begins again, when God's spirit is uncaged by death,
when the one who walked among us dies an individual and is born again as a community.

-Rob Eller-Isaacs (from a sermon quoted in inward-outward,
Ap 9, 2007.)

May God bless this reading of Mary Magdalene's encounter at the empty tomb.

Amen.