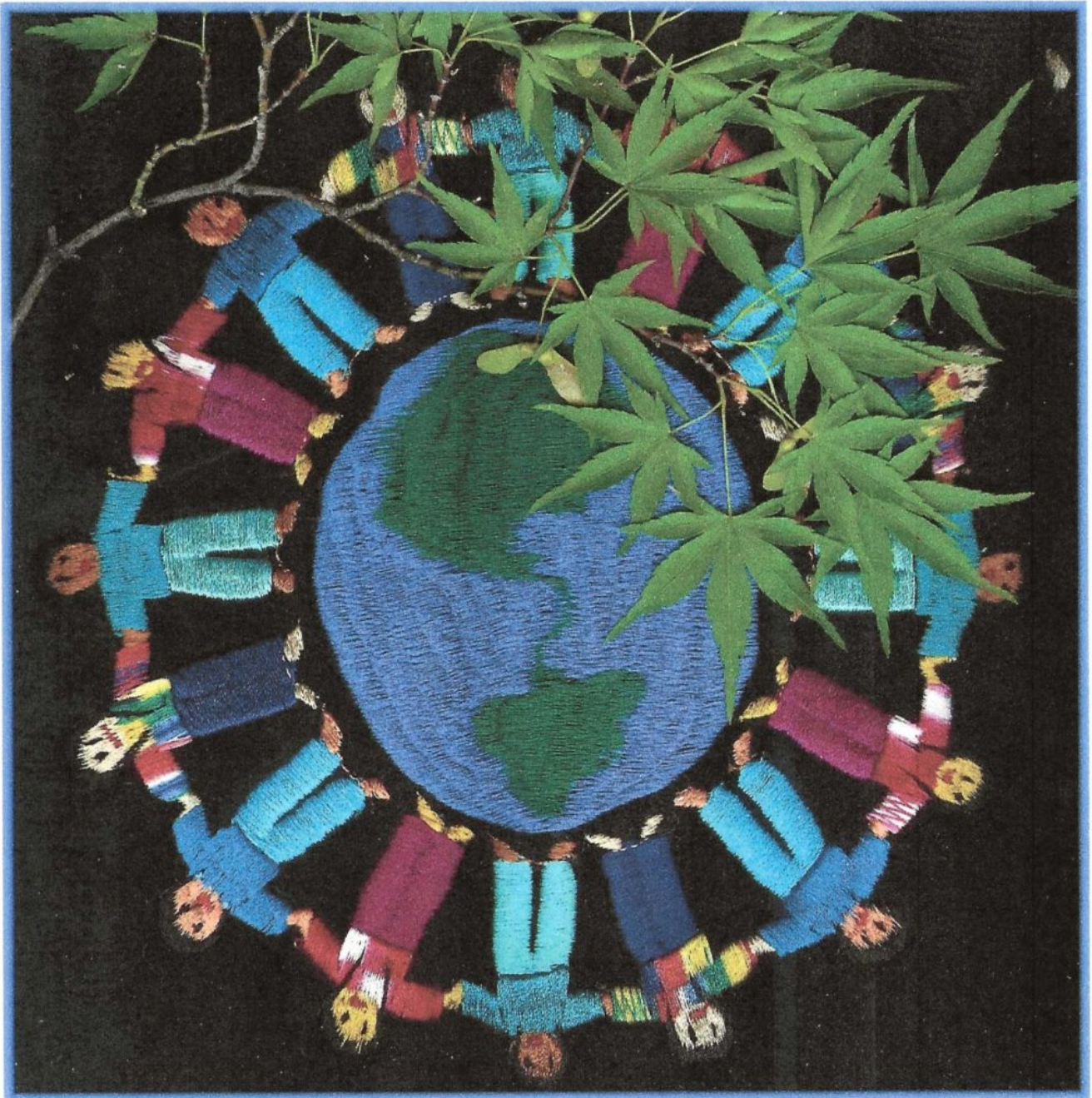


“Resurrection Now?” by Marjory Bankson

Easter Sunday

April 9, 2023

Did you notice the full moon this week? Remember that Easter falls on the first Sunday – after the first full moon – after the Spring Equinox? Unlike Christmas or the 4th of July, Easter moves around with the moon, calling us toward earth and its seasons. Out at Dayspring, the fields are mowed flat and Lake of the Saints is full, waiting for a gaggle of geese to swoop in and nest there. The land seems poised and waiting, pregnant with possibility and new life – but it’s not in full bloom yet.



At home, the news is grim. Full of gun violence, racial tension and climate disasters. Destruction and despair haunt the headlines, and yet we gather this morning to celebrate the possibility of resurrection, not just for Jesus long ago, but for us and for all living creatures on this earth.

Let's begin with our gospel text. Where is resurrection happening in Mary Magdalene's story? Is it simply about Jesus – as he becomes the Christ? Or is there a resurrection for

Mary too? And what about those absent male disciples? What is their experience of resurrection?

Mary's story is so familiar that it's hard to hear it with fresh ears or see it with fresh eyes, but our political division, especially the threat of Christian Nationalism, has sharpened my search for the deeper meanings of these ancient texts.

The first thing I noticed in our text for today was Mary's connection to her community. Although she went alone in the early morning darkness, she ran back to tell the men (who seem to be hiding from the authorities for fear of their lives) that the tomb had been opened. Mary is deeply connected to the inner circle of disciples, even though this is her individual experience. Resurrection always has a communal connection.

Peter and another disciple come back with her. Although John's gospel gives us details of their competitive race to be first, and what they found (linen cloths left behind, the head-wrap neatly rolled in another place), the spotlight stays on Mary as they return home, puzzled and discouraged. They do not seem to return her loyalty to their common experience. Here we see Mary's character, her love, steadfastness and courage contrasted with their self-absorption.

Only then does Mary peer into the empty tomb and see two angels carefully placed a body-length apart. The angel asks a seemingly stupid question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" But here is a clue to the theological strand of the story: Angels in John's gospel always represent God's presence. Eternity entering the present moment. These angels herald another kind of birth story – as resurrection.

But Mary stays at the literal human level: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." It reminds me of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, earlier in John's gospel. The overtones of Mary as an

outsider, ready for a revelation, are important here.

Just then, Jesus appears – but Mary doesn't recognize him. He's in his new spiritual form, present and yet ephemeral, solid enough to be mistaken for the gardener but strangely free of time and space. But when he speaks her name, she knows who it is – and she responds from her oh-so-human heart: "Rabboni! (Teacher!)" And suddenly Mary steps into this eternal dimension herself. She shifts from seeker to student, willing and able to listen for his guidance.

"Don't hold onto me," he says, suggesting that she could do that and STOP the transformation that they are both experiencing. "But go, and tell my brothers what you have seen and heard."

Suddenly SHE is to be their teacher, their guide and comforter. Her resurrection is the CALL that she hears – to step into a new role, a new identity among the disciples. Whether or not they are able to receive her is another issue, but HER transformation, her commissioning, is clear.

As background for this sermon, I've been reading Karen King's excellent analysis of an ancient manuscript that didn't make it into the New Testament. Titled *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, the scroll was probably written early in the second century, close to when the Gospel of John was written.

Dr. King is a professor at the Harvard Divinity School and a leading scholar of early Christian history in the century after Jesus' death. She reminds us that it was a period rich with oral history and visionary prophets. Written letters were few and longer manuscripts were usually dictated and shared communally. In the century after Jesus' death, King writes, there was a lot of discussion about the meaning and purpose of his life and his death. Communities coalesced around these debates and some produced written texts like this one.

Later, as the Christian movement became more integrated with

the power structures of the Roman Empire, a council of bishops directed by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, finally agreed on which books would be included in the New Testament. Other books were to be destroyed!

Fortunately, some of the desert communities buried their written manuscripts, primarily in Egypt and Syria. In addition to the Nag Hammadi find, other single books like the Gospel of Mary are still being discovered or recovered from protective libraries where they have survived nearly 2,000 years of war and weather.

Today we know that the first and second-century churches were full of lively discourse and experimental structures. I want to share with you the summary that Karen King gives of the community described in the Gospel of Mary, because it sounds to me a lot like Church of the Saviour and Seekers!

- God's Realm is already present within oneself and in creation;
- Jesus is seen as a teacher and healer, not a ruler or judge;
- Salvation is an inner process of turning toward God;
- Theological reflection is based on experience of the risen Christ rather than belief in a creed;
- There is an ethic of freedom and spiritual development rather than rules for order and control;
- Spiritually mature people give freely to the community instead of having a rigid hierarchy;
- One's identity as a Christian is not confined by gender roles;
- The Spirit is present in the community NOW, not at some future time.

In other words, with Christ as a healer and teacher, we will continue to grow and ripen as we respond to God's call in

community. Like Mary at the empty tomb, we can experience resurrection, here and now.

My own experience tells me that call is a combination of inward awareness and outward circumstances. And call is not a one-time thing. It happens again and again, throughout our lives, inviting us to shed the protective layers that we have constructed around our tender souls – so we can rest at last in the spirit that quickens each of us.

We see a kind of spiral of call in the backstory of Mary Magdalene. She was not a prostitute or the penitent who washed Jesus' feet with her hair. In Luke 8, we learn that she had been healed of seven demons. She then traveled with Jesus in the company of several prominent women who provided for the group out of their wealth! The Galilean group of disciples were rich and poor, male and female, from all walks of life. It was diverse, inclusive, and challenging social norms by their very presence with one another.

We next see Mary courageously witnessing the crucifixion with the other women. In Matthew, Mark and Luke (the synoptic gospels), Mary is listed first among the women while the male disciples are nowhere to be seen. She also watched where Jesus was entombed after the crucifixion.

Luke tells us that the male disciples later "disbelieved" the women when they told of encountering angels in the empty tomb. Apparently respect and equality were hard to maintain without Jesus. Luke hints at Peter's ambivalence and competition with Mary by adding this: Peter went back to check on the empty tomb and left, "wondering at that which had come to pass."

Traveling with Jesus, supporting them financially, risking arrest as a disciple all laid the groundwork for Mary's call on Easter morning, to go and tell the disciples what she had experienced – making her the first apostle.

We have no biblical record of how that was received, or what

happened to Mary Magdalene. Oral traditions include many stories of Mary and her subsequent ministry, but by the 4th century, when the Nicene Creed solidified what was to be Christian orthodoxy, other books including this Gospel of Mary were branded as “heretical” or “gnostic,” in order to keep them from spreading. Essentially they were banned and ordered to be destroyed.

I want to close by drawing your attention to the first reading assigned for today because it details the more orthodox view in Luke-Acts. In Peter’s speech from Acts 10, women are not mentioned as the first witnesses to the resurrection, right behavior is emphasized, and Jesus is raised up as a cosmic judge, ordained by God, to render judgment on the living and the dead. The focus is right belief, right behavior, and eternal salvation as a reward. It’s the summary that many of us grew up with, in or out of the church.

Here at Seekers, we have chosen Mary’s path, trusting the Spirit in our midst to protect us from error and guide us on the way with Christ. It’s a path full of dialogue and calls to ministry in daily life. It is an inward/outward journey as individuals and as a communal body of Christ in the world today.

If the Apostle Peter’s description is the one you still hold – with Christ sitting in judgment at the end of your life – perhaps this Easter morning can begin with another kind of resurrection in your own heart – as you stand with Mary outside of an empty tomb, hearing your name spoken in the early morning light: *“Mary.... John.... Joan.....Michael. Don’t hold on to an old image of me. Let go of the past. Claim the call to new life that I have for you now.”*

It may feel like death in the beginning, but resurrection is a gift meant for each of us, here and now.

Out at Dayspring, in two weeks the Seekers silent retreat

could also be the place for you to hear that call. The moon will be coming full again, and the earth will be singing its own Hallelujah chorus.

May it be so. Amen.