

Text--John 20:1-18

So, here we are: It is Easter morning.

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The morning of the year when we come into church

saying to each other: He is risen!

And responding: He is risen indeed!

We've been dwelling in dissonance for the six weeks of Lent,

following John's Gospel through the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

We have been living into that retelling

from the lens of our own experience:

our uneasiness with the direction of our nation,

our fear and concern for the future,

our empathy for those more affected

by the building wars, intensity of upheaval,

and rampant injustices than we are.

We have been dwelling in dissonance,

with Jesus, through our immersion in his story.

We have been dwelling in dissonance,

in our lives and, as Holly Near puts it

“—the hurting in our families,

the sorrow in our town,

the panic in the nation,

the wailing in the whole world round.”

Nor does this morning change any of that,

no matter how fervently we may say: He is risen!

Or how fervently we may respond: He is risen, indeed!

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The next time we turn on the news,

we will have incontrovertible evidence

that there is plenty of hurting, sorrow, panic, and wailing

still waiting for resolution, still waiting for justice,

still waiting for healing, still waiting for mercy.

Nor are we alone in that reality:

After the resurrection, the disciples still met secretly,

behind closed doors,

wondering who might be crucified next.

If, after the resurrection, Cleopas and his friend

on the way to Emmaus,

had met a Roman soldier along the way,

they still would have been subject to carrying

the soldier's gear for a mile.

After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene assumes the worst

the morning she goes to the tomb.

***They* have taken his body.**

We don't know where *they* have put him.

She knows all too well, that she and her people,

are NOT in control of the situation.

Jesus had risen from the grave, although she didn't know it yet,

**but *they*, whoever they were, still controlled the life
of the little band of disciples.**

**Mary Magdalene is someone who in life and also in her influence
over Christian history after her death,
is particularly well-suited to help us celebrate Easter
in a time of dissonance.**

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**Both her presence in the story of Jesus and her place in Christian history
is rife with dissonance.**

**Mary Magdalene was called that
to distinguish her from the many other Marys in the Bible.
She was from Magdala, a small fishing village
on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.**

**Small of course is relative, around 3000 people,
which when I was growing up in Illinois,
was about the size of Eureka,
with its Woodford County Courthouse.**

To us, a pretty big town indeed!

**Archeological findings reveal a thriving community
there along the lake with its robust fishing trade.**

**Mary Magdalene, Peter and Andrew, James and John
shared a similar upbringing and early experience.**

**Jesus had a strong fishing cohort among his disciples,
and Mary was one of them.**

One of the dissonances about Mary Magdalene in the text

is how we think about her discipleship,

or, rather, how we tend to downplay it,

or how, perhaps, the Gospel writers themselves

downplayed it.

This Mary from Magdala is mentioned 14 times.

We can compare that to Peter with 311 mentions.

But he's the anomaly; he is the star.

Andrew, Peter's brother, only has 13 mentions.

James and John, most often mentioned with Peter,

have 15 and 29 mentions respectively.

Thomas is mentioned just 10 times

and after that, except for Judas Iscariot at 26,

none of the rest of the disciples

are mentioned more than 5 times.

So, while Mary may not be named as one of the twelve apostles,

she clearly has a place in that inner circle around Jesus.

In fact, she plays a bigger role in Jesus' life and ministry

than half of the apostles.

I venture to say

that if we were to someday meet up with her in heaven,

we'd have an easier time picking up a conversation

with her than, say, Thaddeus or Bartholomew.

We just know much more about her.

Speaking of dissonance, like many women in leadership

throughout the ages, who did not get enough credit at the time,

Mary of Magdala has also not had any easy time of it

through the ages, through the ups and downs of history.

She has been venerated and treated with great honor,

especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

She is, after all, a recognized saint.

But she has also been degraded and treated with disdain,

dismissed as mentally ill or possessed with demons,

on the basis of her healing story in Luke 8.

She has also been sexualized,

seen as a prostitute without any evidence whatsoever,

or, in many of the fictionalized versions of the gospel story,

as Jesus' lover or wife.

This Mary is,

as Eliza Griswald pointed out in a New Yorker magazine,

a year ago, both the second most famous woman

in Christianity after Jesus' mother,

and the most hotly contested figure in the NT.

In art, in music, in plays, in movies, in television series,

she has been put on a pedestal, scorned and mocked,

caricatured, sexualized, praised and condemned.

**And this lovely and beleaguered woman,
caught in the dissonance of her time.
as well as the dissonance of our time,
is the disciple John invites us to accompany
on our own journey into resurrection in these days.**

**In the blustery gray of an Elkhart Easter morning,
we follow Mary of Magdala to Jesus' tomb.**

**We walk alongside her as she returns to the place
where she had last seen**

**her beloved Lord's very broken body,
finally laid to rest after a particularly long
and cruel execution.**

**In John's account of the crucifixion,
we have last seen her at the foot of the cross.**

**When Jesus is dying on the cross,
the soldiers who callously, matter-of-factly broke his body,
carefully preserved the integrity of his cloak.**

Refusing to cut it or tear it, they cast lots for it.

Mary, his mother,

Mary, the wife of Clopas,

Mary Magdalene, three Marys,

were all there, watching this unbearable act.

Helpless, grief-stricken, angry, sobbing,

heartbroken, inconsolable, traumatized.

We could try more words, but we cannot plumb

the depth of their despair.

Perhaps only those who have witnessed beloved ones

destroyed by senseless violence,

can fully understand what these three women

were going through.

When Jesus died, when It was finally, mercifully over,

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus

cared for his ravaged corpse,

and laid him in a garden tomb at the edge

of the place he was executed.

Then there was Sabbath.

The next morning, the first day of the new week,

according to John's account,

Mary Magdalene went alone to the tomb.

We do not know why she went alone;

nor do we know her purpose.

In Luke's account she is in a company of women

and they go to further prepare Jesus' body—

those sacred duties having been interrupted

by the Sabbath.

John's account is more stark.

Mary goes to the tomb early, before light, by herself.

Something is wildly amiss and she is dismayed—

the grave has been violated

and the stone is no longer in place.

She immediately seeks out Peter and the other disciple,

designated only as the one Jesus loved,

to tell them that the worst she can imagine has happened:

***They* have taken the Lord out of the tomb,**

and *we* do not know where they have taken him.

Notice the “we.” Was someone else with Mary?

Did she stop on her way

to Peter and the other disciple to tell someone?

Did she meet someone on the way and blurt out the news?

We don't know and there is no variant reading to give us any guesses.

The unexplained “we” is a dissonance that

comes down through the ages,

faithfully transcribed as “we” in every text we have,

as puzzling as it seems to be.

We also do not know who the “they” are.

The keepers of the memorial garden?

The Roman soldiers who carried out the execution?

The religious leaders who colluded with the Romans?

**Peter and the other disciple come out from where they were staying,
and discover for themselves that indeed the tomb is empty.**

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**The only signs that Jesus' body has been there
are some discarded grave clothes.**

Without further explanation,

Peter and the other disciple go back to their homes.

You'd think that the author who tells us

all the details about how the grave clothes are positioned

might say a little something

about why Peter and the other disciple just go home.

But, no, our author leaves us a little more dissonance to ponder.

Mary stays. And we do know why.

She is weeping, overcome with emotion,

perhaps can do nothing other than mourn.

She stands outside the tomb, crying.

She stoops to look into the tomb, crying.

She encounters two angels who ask her

why she is crying?

She answers, still crying, as if they ought to know why.

Which they surely did, or surely should have, being angels.

"Because they have taken him away," she says.

And I do not know where he is."

Through her tears, she speaks of her utter bereavement,

it is a sorrow too deep to bear.

Then the story turns—because Mary turns.

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It's an odd phrase.

**Literally—Having said what she said to the angels,
she turned into the things behind her.**

We think of resurrection as forward looking.

But here Mary turns into the things behind her.

Was she intending to go home like Peter and John?

What she finds, turning into the things behind her,

is the Jesus she has known and followed for a very long time.

But, speaking of dissonance, she doesn't recognize him.

**This matter of not recognizing the risen Lord is also attested in Luke,
in the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus.**

And in both Matthew and Mark there are records

**of both fear and confusion as well as joy accompanying
the good news of the resurrection.**

Whatever the long term reception of the resurrection,

there is little doubt that in the short term,

the response was a muddle of both joy and uneasiness.

In Luke, the disciples disbelieve for joy.

A statement summing up the muddle about as well as anything.

It is clear that the resurrection is not a rescue from dissonance.

When Mary turns into the things behind her that morning,

she doesn't mistake the risen Lord for an angel.

She has just turned away from the angels that she clearly recognized.

She mistakes Jesus for a gardener.

We don't exactly know what that means,

but we can be pretty sure that she wasn't dazzled

by the glory or brightness of her resurrected Lord.

More likely is that she encountered the wounded healer,

the Jesus who had been through torture and execution,

through hell and back.

Almost unrecognizable even to those who knew him best.

But if Mary has trouble recognizing Jesus,

he certainly recognizes her.

He recognizes her as a woman,

a seeker,

and he calls her tenderly by name.

Furthermore, he has a mission for her.

He says in words we have difficulty hearing—do not cling to me,

but go, and tell my brothers and sisters what has happened.

Of course, Mary wants to stay with Jesus.

Of course, Peter wanted to build three booths on the mountain.

Our Peter, our own beloved Peter Martin,

said something similar that we found difficult a few weeks ago.

He said the kingdom is coming, but not here.

If it did come, if it were here, he went on to say,

it would no longer be the kingdom.

In the garden,

on the mountain,

at Fellowship of Hope,

we practice the resurrection, but we cannot grab it.

We move into the mission,

the mission that is larger than we are,

that existed before we were born,

and will continue after we are all dead.

As the old hymn asks, did e'er such love and sorrow meet?

See from his head, his hands, his feet,

sorrow and love flow mingled down.

It is the ultimate dissonance of our gospel story.

Jesus has been saying throughout the Gospel of John

That no one has greater love than the one who lays down

one's life for one's friend.

The most important truth of the resurrection,

the most important truth of the kingdom of God,

is not some ethereal triumph of everlasting life.

It is, instead, the everlasting significance of love and sorrow mingling,

laying down one's life for one's friends, an enduring trust

that love is stronger than death,

that love does indeed have the final word,

the ultimate dissonance

that has the power to change the world.

In that holy space where love and sorrow meet,

is a way to be practiced but never grabbed or grasped.

To be lived but neither used nor exploited.

Love so amazing, so divine,

demands my soul, my life, my all.