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St. John's Episcopal Church

Easter

MARY MAGADLENE: MOURNING BROKEN

After Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover, Joseph of Arimathea took his body away. Nicodemus assisted Joseph, bringing with him a mixture of myrrh and aloes. They wrapped Jesus in linen cloths. There was a garden in the place of crucifixion. A new tomb had been cut. (Mt. 27:59 ff) They laid Jesus there and rolled a great stone to seal the tomb; and they departed.

But Mary Magdalene sat there opposite the sepulcher.

Parting with the beloved can be excruciatingly final. There is comfort in staying close by and privacy to shed tears without restraint. There is a bridge to cross. A new, tender and unexplored territory awaits. So Mary Magdalene is there. She does not need to know why she is there. She is just there.

The throb of grief can shatter rest and sleep, but not without promise. Two days later, well before morning had broken, Mary Magdalene awoke. She got up in the dark of night to make her way to the tomb. A waning Passover moon shadowed her steps. She went alone, desiring again just to be close to Jesus, drawn to an unseen presence. When she saw that the stone sealing the tomb had been removed, she acted quickly. Alarmed and fearing that somebody had taken the body, she ran back to get Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved. She told them that the body was gone, and poignantly added, "We do not know where they have laid him." Then the disciples race to the tomb.

The-disciple-Jesus-loved is faster and arrives first at the tomb, but does not go in. Then Peter arrives and goes right into the tomb. It is true to character for Peter to plunge into things. *Then* the other disciple goes in also. Unlike Mary who waits, they are in a hurry. It is not clear what they deduce from what they see. In a bland conclusion to this scene in the drama, the two of them simply return to their homes.

What are they thinking; what are they feeling? By reporting Peter as the first one to actually enter the tomb, the gospel writer is attempting to establish the primacy of Peter, a hierarchic preeminence that the Western church would solidify over the coming centuries.

But this is not simple. After the two disciples return to their homes, Mary again is alone outside the tomb weeping. She has lost Jesus twice now. She fears she will never see what remains of her beloved again. Take a moment and imagine being Mary outside the tomb ... bereft, confused, knowing little and apparently fearing the worst. Not only is Jesus' body gone, but as a final indignity, someone seems to have stripped it of the linen cloths in which it had been carefully wrapped and laid.

As she weeps, she bends over and looks into the cave. She sees two angels in white who ask her ironically, "Woman, why are you weeping?" The question delights us because we know the answer and we think we know the end of the story. Mary does not question the reality of the angels who communicate between this world and the other. The fact that she is unfazed and responds with trust says a lot about Mary. She repeats her lament about the disappearance of the body. Then Jesus appears. And, like the angels, he also asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Mistaking him for the gardener (remember the tomb is in a garden), she wants to know if he

has taken the body. If he would tell her where he has laid it she will take the body away. Mary's persistence and devotion is striking and touching. The body is the only thing she thinks she has left and she *must* find it. This longing to get close to Jesus' body is not rational, neither is it irrational. It is deeper.

Seeing or touching the body of a deceased loved one can be fundamentally reassuring to the survivor.

Mary does not recognize Jesus until he calls her by name. What is it about the remembered voice of a loved one that connects? After he says, "Mary", simply "Mary", she knows instantly. She turns to him. What a turn that is. "Rabbouni", she responds with recognition. Rabbouni is an affectionate term for "teacher". The use of an affectionate ending suggests something about the closeness of Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

Mary's seeing and understanding come in progressive phases. Naturally she wants to hold Jesus, but he says, "Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Mary, like Jesus, is in transformation.

Mary Magdalene is sometimes referred to as the "apostle of the apostles", or in the Middle Ages, *Apostola Apostolorum*. There is something very special about her. But why this title?

Because she stayed by the tomb when the other disciples went into hiding. She alone got up in the night and went unaccompanied to the tomb. She alone ran back to get Peter and the other disciple. She alone stayed outside the empty tomb and was the only one greeted by angels and then by Jesus himself. And finally, because she is the first one he commissions to go to the other disciples to tell them all she has seen.

Over two millennia Mary Magdalene has been inaccurately portrayed as a reformed prostitute, a repentant sinner. There is no sound

scriptural basis for this unless you cook up a lot of different fragments from the four gospels and add to that recipe a large portion of projection. The church hierarchy developed this bad rap for the first five centuries after Jesus' death. It was sealed by Pope Gregory the Great in a sermon in 594. Episcopal Priest and theologian, Cynthia Bourgeault writes, "That in a nutshell is the 'how' of it: the slippery slope along which we moved from Mary Magdalene 'apostle of apostles', to Mary Magdalene, penitent prostitute (whore)."

Attempting to reverse centuries of distortion, in 1969 the Vatican officially rejected the composite version of Mary. Misrepresentation of Mary as the penitent prostitute, however, continues unabated in popular belief and culture; as in, for example, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*.

But this is not the Mary we encounter on this Alleluia day. This Mary comes to us strong-in-love and acts courageously and decisively. She relinquishes the one she adores and follows his command to go tell the disciples all she has seen and heard.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan write, "Without Easter we wouldn't know about Jesus. If history had ended with the crucifixion he most likely would have been forgotten --- another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed 1000s of such executions. ... Easter is central."

Easter was God's "yes" to love over death and the vindication of Jesus' life and mission over the imperial powers that put him to death. Something extraordinary happened that day without which we would not be continuing faithfully to explore the nature of Jesus. In fact, we would not be here in this sanctuary today.

Nor would we be singing the praises of Mary Magdalene. We would have missed something vital, whole and immensely hopeful. What begins as a great loss for Mary is astonishingly resurrected. We too, through our losses, discover something more, something new, something joyful.

“i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:
and of the gay great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened) e e cummings