

Weirdest Holy Easter Ever (Whee!)

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John 20:1-18

The Easter story doesn't start with a celebration at all, instead it is in a fearful and confusing mood that Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb on Easter morning. In John's gospel, only Mary goes, on her own. She goes before it is light, in the dark. She is the first disciple on Easter, the one willing to go to the tomb, to pray, to weep, to remember all that happened in Jerusalem.

Early on Eastern morning, it appears the powers of darkness have prevailed. Jesus died, and the disciples have scattered like the wind.

It's a dark time now as well. Today we are celebrating the Weirdest Holy Easter Ever. We are behind the doors of our homes with our loved ones sheltering at home to stay safe. Some of us are very worried about the virus and what it might mean for us, our families and our communities. Others are now worried about their livelihoods and their schooling. We are living through a time that we could not imagine.

Death is in all the headlines. One of my new daily practices, perhaps like yours, is to check the death count from the coronavirus. Is it increasing, staying the same? The future is uncertain and we wonder whether we can make plans – for May? June? Later? We just don't know.

Checking in on the work of death was the first thing that Mary Magdalene had to do on that first Easter Sunday morning. Someone who was both notable and personal had fallen victim to death. Jesus of Nazareth was notable. Almost everyone in the area knew who he was—the itinerant rabbi who did signs and wonders, whom some said was the long-awaited Messiah.

And Mary knew him personally. From the other gospels we know that she helped to fund his ministry, she had a personal relationship with him. She was one of the women who went all the way to the cross to watch him die. And she was the first to go to the tomb on this Easter morning. She need to tend to death that morning.

The story turns here, the story of death turns to the story of new life. She finds the stone rolled away there is a part of the story that involves some of the disciples coming

to the tomb and finding Jesus' body gone, and then they disappear. Mary is left alone in the garden, and finds in this garden a gardener, who turns out to be Jesus himself, risen.

At this point in this story, Jesus asks an important question, "Whom do you seek? This is an important question, and on it turns the entire story because the story of Easter is our story today, because our encounters with Jesus can turn our tears into joy.

Whom do we seek? Are we looking for or the tender love of a community? Are we looking for more possessions and stuff to fill our dark places, or are we willing to open ourselves to the tender heart of God and God's followers that will reach out to us, to hold us, to set us on a new path?

Jesus says her name, "Mary!" and the moment of recognition comes. Mary, the one who weeps, is the first to really see Jesus. Mary, the one who stays by the tomb, says the first words. So Jesus calls "Mary" from the tomb of unbelief and despair and weeping, and it is this calling, this unique one-to-one relationship with Jesus that made all the difference to Mary, as it would to John and Peter, and all the apostles.

It was Mary who saw him.

It was Mary who knew it was him.

It was Mary who believed and ran to tell others.

Mary realizes that Jesus lives, and Jesus loves. That is the very definition of having faith in Jesus.

The story takes yet another turn here. For Mary, so full of the joy to see Jesus, has obviously taken hold of him – meeting him body to body, soul to soul. And instead of softening into her embrace, he tells her, "Do not cling to me." A little ironic today, right?

Don't hang onto Jesus? Why not? Here he is, in body and there for the talking to, and yet Mary, in the tomb, must not hold on.

Every time we think we have hold of Jesus, he won't stay long because he has places he wants to take us, people he wants us to meet. Jesus is free of the grave and roaming at large in the world now. He will not be confined again. He is on the loose, and will not be tracked like an animal. But he's not just on the loose from us, avoiding intimacy, a God afraid of commitment.

Jesus is telling Mary: Do not cling to the old history, the old hurts, the injustices of the past. Just as with Mary, we too are freed from death, and can now build a new way, based on this new love and power of God in Jesus the Christ.

Howard Thurman, the great Methodist theologian and author put it this way:

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Jesus calls us by our names too. We today are called into a new life just as Mary was that first day. And then we know that it is our beloved one, who speaks to us at tomb-side, who tells us we are known and loved, and that death has been overcome.

And let's remember how the story plays out from here, as we sit in our homes, waiting for the scientists and the authorities to tell us it is ok to gather in groups again. After the initial appearance, the disciples stayed close with each other for a while. They prayed, and asked for God's guidance on what to do now that Jesus was risen. Jesus didn't go showing off again to great crowds.

The disciples did what people of faith do – they got settled in themselves and waited on God's leading.

Resurrection life means a life of purpose and meaning. It's just so strange for us to think that right here and now, defeating death for ourselves and those we know as well as those in our communities means staying home. It's really hard for some of us right now – it's not an easy thing at all.

Friends, I am looking forward to the day when we will gather again as the people of God. I am looking forward to opening the service by saying, "This is the day that the Lord has made," and all of you will answer "Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

The truth is, this is always true, whether or not we are gathered together, this is always true, because we live in Christ.

Christ *is* Risen. Alleluia!