

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18

Resurrection of the Lord, Easter
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 9, 2023

The Appearance to Mary Magdalene

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we hear the promise that in the age to come God will “destroy the shroud that is cast over all people” and “will swallow up death forever.” We hear the promise that the Lord will “wipe away the tears from all faces.” Sorrow will be replaced with joy at a feast of unimaginable proportions. Listen to these words from Isaiah 25:6-9 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

At the heart of the Gospel reading for this Sunday is the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, leading to her declaration to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” It’s a wonderful story of a seeking woman who is surprised by what she finds. Listen to these words from John 20:1-18 . . .

Sermon

There has been plenty of gloom in the last week of our Lord. It is there in the sounds: calls to “crucify him”; the sound of weeping over Jesus’ suffering; the crowing of the cock that convicted Peter of his denial of even knowing Jesus; the clatter of coins expressing Judas’ regret at betrayal; the splash of water by indecisive Pilate; the thud of the hammer on Jesus’ hands and feet; the rattle of dice by soldiers gambling for his seamless garment beneath the cross; and that final cry of Jesus, “It is finished.”

From a human perspective the cross was the ultimate suffering and humiliation. However, from a divine perspective it can be seen as the triumph of obedient love. Although it seemed to Jesus’ enemies that he had died in defeat and shame, really he died like a king. Not a king of this world, but a heavenly king. It was appropriate that written on the cross in each of the three great languages of the time—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—were the words, “The King of the Jews.”

When Jesus said, “It is finished” (19:30), the race was won. “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Seen this way, the resurrection was not so much the reversal of an apparent tragedy, but the confirmation of a completed battle.

But naturally, prior to the resurrection, the followers of Jesus were forlorn. They had entered the valley of the shadow of death and all was dark. Their dearest friend was dead and gone, their hopes and dreams crushed by hard reality. They were dejected, disillusioned, and defeated.

Today’s lesson from the 20th chapter of John presents us with three of those disheartened followers of Jesus: Mary Magdalene, John, and Simon Peter. Today we will focus on Mary Magdalene. This Mary is not the unnamed sinner of Luke 7 (v. 37). This is the Mary who became a close friend of Jesus and was there supporting him in his final terrifying moments and is now mourning his death. Mary stayed with Jesus at the cross, and would shortly become the “apostle to the apostles.”

It is striking that Mary Magdalene plays a crucial role at the climax of the fourth Gospel. For in the Jewish world of the first century, the testimony of a woman was normally not given much credence. And the fact that she was a Galilean from Magdala, a town notoriously wicked, would not enhance the credibility of her testimony in Jerusalem. But perhaps most damaging of all was the problem that she had once been possessed by demons (Lk. 8:2). And even though Mary had been healed by Jesus, her testimony could easily invite questions. So it is quite astounding that the most momentous news in the history of humankind is entrusted to one who, in the eyes of the world, would hardly qualify as a creditable witness. But God’s ways are not our ways and a lowly woman with questions about her medical history will discover and proclaim the good news of Easter. But we’re getting ahead of the story.

William Barclay tells us that it was the custom in ancient Palestine to visit the tomb of a loved one for three days after the body had been placed there. But when Mary arrived that Sunday morning, she was shocked and amazed, for tombs were normally closed. In front of the opening there ran a groove in the ground; and in the groove there ran a stone; and the stone was wheeled into position to form a covering to the entrance of the tomb. Further, Matthew tells us that the authorities had actually sealed the stone to make sure that no one would move it.

So on her arrival that morning Mary was astonished to find the stone removed. It may be that she thought that Jewish opponents of Jesus had taken his body away. Not satisfied with crucifying him on a cross, she could imagine that they were inflicting further indignities on his dead body. Or she may have thought that the tomb had been robbed, for one of the grimmest features of ancient crime was that there were actually people who made it their business to rob tombs of artifacts or personal effects, or even to use the body in a rite of magic.

Mary may have thought that the tomb had been broken into and the body of Jesus desecrated or taken away. Whatever was in Mary's mind, one thing is clear, she thought "they" had done something to Jesus' body. And she is overcome. She is bewildered.

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (Jn. 20:2)

John tells us of their going to the tomb and then this:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. (20:11)

And then as she wept, she bent over and looked into the tomb and saw two angels where the body of Jesus had been lying. The angels ask her why she is weeping and Mary explains that it is because the body of Jesus has been taken away, and she does not know where it has been placed. At this, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not know it is Jesus.

Jesus asks about her weeping and about whom she is looking for. Mary thinks he is the gardener and that perhaps he has removed the body of Jesus. Then Jesus calls her by her name—“Mary,”— and Mary turns and recognizes him. It was like she heard the whole gospel message in the sound of her name. Perhaps Jesus had spoken that way when he had healed Mary, or when he looked down from the cross upon her faithful devotion. In any event, she heard Jesus call her name, and Mary responds to Jesus with “Rabboni” (which means teacher).

If we follow the text, we see that it was not the empty tomb that brought Mary Magdalene to faith—she simply thinks something has happened to Jesus’ body, that it has been moved. The appearance of two angels neither allays her grief nor prompts faith in the risen Lord. In fact, even when Jesus appears, she does not recognize him. Only when he speaks her name does she believe. Thus was fulfilled what had earlier been said of Jesus, the Good Shepherd: He knows his own, he calls them by name, and they recognize his voice. (10:3) Theologian Henri Nouwen says that Jesus doesn’t just know Mary’s name, he knows Mary of Magdala. He knows her life, her heart. He knows her better than she knows herself. When Jesus utters her name, Mary recognizes him and sees new life. Weeping may have endured for a night, but joy has come in the morning.

It has been suggested that the reason Mary could not recognize Jesus was because the tears of grief were blurring her vision. When a loved one is lost there may well be tears in our eyes, revealing the sorrow in our hearts. But normally we are weeping for ourselves—our sorrow, our loss, our hearts breaking at the death of someone near and dear. They won’t be with us to do the things we’ve enjoyed so much.

Mary’s tears might remind us that even though such grief is natural and can even be necessary in the healing process, the tears should not blind us to the glory of heaven. The place

where every tear will be wiped away and death will be no more. Where there will no longer be suffering and sorrow. Where we will live in the eternal light of God's loving presence.

Now we believe that Jesus didn't just know *Mary's* name, he knows ours as well. Not just our names, the Good Shepherd knows our hopes and dreams, and he knows our hurts and sorrows. He knows the cross we carry, the burden we can hardly bear.

Let me suggest that as a church of Christ here at Midway Presbyterian we can be an Easter community of people who have heard the Good Shepherd call us by name. We can join Mary in being enfolded into a new life of love and witness. As we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us, we will bear much fruit. We can be an Easter community as we call each other by name. And we can reach out to other people in the name of Christ, especially people who might fall under the category of "the least of these."

I recall that during the long war in Iraq, one of the news channels at the end of each week would name each soldier who had been killed that week. They did so by silently placing their names and pictures on the screen. Many were in their 20's and 30's, and it was heartbreaking.

As an Easter community we can reach out to people in grief, to people who may feel left out of life's parade: a child at Thornwell or Calvary Home; a hungry person through our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering; a pregnant woman and child through our Jar Offering; a member who is shut-in; someone in the community who needs a church home. We may not know all their names, but God does. And when we reach out to them in the name of Christ, we reflect God's love and care.

But what is Mary to do? She is not to keep Jesus' presence to and for herself. She is to stop crying and go to the disciples with word of his impending ascension. Jesus instructs Mary not to try to hold on to him, but to "go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (20:17b)

And that's just what she does. Mary Magdalene goes and tells them of these things. She proclaims to them, "I have seen the Lord."

When Jesus appeared to Mary and spoke her name that Easter morning, her closed world was broken wide open. Something completely unexpected, out of the ordinary, seemingly impossible, happened. The One who was crucified, dead, and buried, called her by name. And it was a new day, a new beginning.

That is why on this day the Christian church pulls out all the stops. Ancient cathedrals tremble with the good news of Easter. Little country churches aflame with lilies and flowering crosses sing forth their praise of new life, of life renewed. Christ the Lord is risen today! And he's with us today. In our hearts. In our midst. Going before us. Calling us by name.

My friends, the God we worship does the miraculous, the illogical, the extraordinary. He transforms death to life. Tears to joy. This is the day the Lord has made—a day for rejoicing and thanksgiving, a day for singing. Not the end. But a new beginning. Not so we can live in the past. But so we can live in the present and face tomorrow. *Sure* that the One who knows our name, knows us. *Sure* that because he lives, we shall live also. *Sure* that together we can be an Easter community that goes and tells others in word and deed the good news of our living Lord.

Ann Weems wrote a poem entitled, "And the Glory." It's in her book *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, the last part of which reads,

Oh, pilgrims,
 Upon your knees in tearful prayer,
 Rise up and take your hearts
 And run!
 We who were no people
 Are named anew God's people,
 For He who was no more is forevermore.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.