

Staying with the Unknown John 20:1-18 Easter 2017

Easter, Christ rising from the dead is the central story of our faith. It is beautifully told by all four Gospel writers, and as we often see, they agree on the basics of the events, but differ widely on details. For example, All four gospels tell us the women disciples stay with Jesus through the difficult days before Easter. They are witnesses at the cross, but are also the ones that discover the empty tomb early Easter morning. Unlike the men, the women did not abandon Jesus. But then the Easter stories begin to be different. Matthew and today's gospel reading from John have Jesus appear to either all the women or to Mary Magdalene on Easter day. Mark and Luke have only an empty tomb on Easter. In Mark that is where the story ends. In Luke Jesus appears in the days after Easter.

One of the reasons the church rotates which Easter story we read each year is that each has unique things to say about how the disciples, both men and women, responded to this strange and wonderful; frightening and mysterious end of the story of Jesus. This year we read John's account, which has Mary Magdalene as the main character of the story.

Mary and, we think, the other women as implied by Mary saying "we do not know where they have taken him," discover the stone rolled away. They run back and tell the disciples. And then we have that wonderful running race between Peter and the one that Jesus loved - who in the Gospel of John is John - and surprise, surprise, John - whose 3rd or 4th generation disciples write this Gospel, wins the race, but does not go in until Peter goes first. An interesting detail. The two of them see the empty tomb and the grave clothes folded there, and then they leave. Isn't that strange? Why do they leave? Perhaps, like Mary, they believe someone has just moved the body or maybe, still fearing for their lives, they don't want to get caught in some trap. Whatever the reason, they are unwilling to just stay and sit with the unknown... the mystery... the question.

We don't like staying with the unknown, it makes us uncomfortable. We, like Peter and John, may live in denial - pretending we aren't waiting to hear about the medical test, or the loved one struggling with addiction. Maybe we know staying with

the mystery can be a long journey. Some mysteries, after all, will never be fully answered in this life, and so we don't continue the exploration about spiritual questions like "what happened that first Easter?" Or "how should it affect how we live?." Our other tendency is to be like Mary Magdalene, and we fill in the story with our best guess of the answer. "Someone must've taken his body away." she thinks. But even though she fills in the story, Mary still stays there, She remains in the comfort and the loneliness of the unknown. And because she stays there, because she remains there in the midst of the mystery, she has a mystical experience. She sees and hears the message of the angels and then she, and she alone in John's Gospel, she encounters the risen Christ on Easter morning.

It is her tenacity, her willingness to live with the unknown, that allows her this profound experience. But the mystery does not end there. After Jesus calls her name, with wonder she realizes who he is, and Jesus then says, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" OK, so Jesus is there, but he tells Mary she cannot hold on to him. Why? Why can't she hold onto his feet as the women do in the Gospel of Matthew when he appears to all of them? Jesus tells her not to hold onto him because he must ascend - he must rise up and become more than he was. Jesus, tells her that for his mission to be complete, he must enter the Realm of Heaven where he will become even more a part of the power and love of God. She cannot hold him to earth, because he is going beyond the human realm.

Two other stories came to my mind as I considered Jesus's appearance to Mary in the Gospel of John. Like all Star Wars fans, I remember vividly the first movie when Obi-Wan-Kenobi and Darth Vader meet in a light saber battle. Vader boasts of being more powerful than his old teacher and believes he will be victorious. But Obi-Wan says "If you strike me down I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." And not long after the Jedi withdraws his sword and allows Vader to strike him down. And as all Star Wars Geeks like me know, as the story progresses we learn that Obi Wan Kenobi was absolutely right.

The second story is an old play entitled, "The Trial of Jesus," by John Masefield. In the play the centurion who oversaw Jesus' crucifixion reports back to Pilate. Pilate's wife asks the centurion to tell her about Jesus' death. After hearing his description, she asks, "Do you think he's dead?" "No, my lady," he replies. "He's been let loose in the world where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth."

So what is our task this Easter? We have three choices, Like John and Peter we can take the Easter story at face value. We can see the empty tomb and then, without spending any more time with the unknown, depart for home. Or we can be like Mary early in the story. We can fill in the explanation of the empty tomb with our own thoughts and answers. That is a valid choice. But the Gospel of John tells us that to be blessed with spiritual insight and experience, we must stay with the unknown. We must stay with the mystery as Mary did. Mary Magdalene saw Jesus overcome death, but she still could not touch him, she could not feel the mystery directly. We today are unable to touch or even see the resurrected One, but perhaps we can still hear the Easter story. Oh, it may not be easy in the loud clanging of empires and politics and war and injustice, but perhaps we can join Indian author and civil rights activist Arundhati Roy, who once said "Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

Can we take time to hear the quiet story of Easter breathing today? Can we celebrate the story of life rising out of death, of justice triumphing over oppression, of love overcoming power? It is a story of joy. It is a story that emboldens the disciples to live and die sharing the message of Jesus. How can we experience what they did. How can we be awakened and enlivened to live out the truth, the love and the light of our faith? We must stay with the unknown, we must live with the mystery, for as long as it takes, perhaps even a lifetime. And if we do, we will hear, and someday perhaps see and touch the Mystery and the Power of Easter. AMEN

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary

Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.