

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on John 20.1-18

Mary Magdalene was the first person, male or female, to witness the empty tomb...the first to see angels who reported the resurrection...the first to hear the voice of, and see, the risen Christ...and the first to be commissioned to go tell the others. Given her prominent place in John's gospel as the one who first, and arguably best, experiences the risen Christ she might be considered Jesus' most faithful follower. And the one for whom the greatest miracle was achieved.

When Jesus found her, she was claimed to have 7 evil spirits in her. She, too, according to tradition, was considered to be a woman of ill repute by society: a prostitute. If these things about her were true, then her life would have been the epitome of a despised existence in her society. She would have been familiar with heartache, ostracization, and the close-mindedness of those who thought they had a grip on reality in thinking themselves superior to her. But it was she who ended up teaching them about a different reality: that of resurrection – a life full of possibilities beyond all the prisons of our past.

From the start, in her darkest hour, she opened herself up to the message of one who told us we all have the image of God within us; and to the example of how transformative love can be when it is given unconditionally. She was on the lowest rung of life when Jesus exorcised her spirit from one of waywardness and despair to a path of meaning and purpose. She trusted that her life could be transformed through living in accordance with the values and virtues of Jesus. And that she was! Her life is perhaps the best example of what it means to be resurrected – of having abided in the tomb of social alienation until Jesus taught her the way of abundant living.

In the Bible, it is usually the "least of these" that God most seems to be able to speak to most readily. Why do you think that is? God was able to get their attention. They hear God, and talk with God, in ways that the self-assured seldom experience.

Consider that Jesus' self-chosen disciples were hiding away in an upper room for fear that what happened to him might happen to them. But it was Mary Magdalene who had the fearlessness to venture out in public to visit Jesus' burial site. And when she went back to report what she found, she followed the two disciples who went to the abandoned tomb to see for themselves. When the two male disciples arrived and found a missing Jesus, they assumed the worst: that his body had been stolen. Sullen and feeling helpless, they went back to their homes. Perhaps they did not want to face their sorrows, fears, and feelings of impotence. But Mary stuck around. And she wept.

Sometimes allowing ourselves to cry, openly and prolifically, opens us to new dimensions of reality that we cannot experience without going into that pit of despair. It takes courage to go to that place where we are unsure whether we'll ever be able to recover. But when we confront the worst that is imaginable, we see solutions unavailable to our understanding when we are in denial of what is happening.

Hiding from their fears, the male disciples were closed to the initial experience of the risen Christ. They wanted to go back to their homes, to safety and security, to a place which was familiar, even if not revitalizing, in order to see what they could salvage of their previous lives. But Mary's history of delving into the depths of human emotion opened up her heart, mind, and soul to seeing life, reality, and God's presence in a whole new way. She was open to transformation...to resurrection.

Granted, she was not quick to perceive this. She had to wrestle with what others, and her own way of thinking, told her was impossible. But when she heard her name called, she recognized that the one who had loved her for who God made her to be was as present to her as he had ever been. Her experience of his reality post-resurrection was even more enlivening for her than her prior encounters with him. She was herself given the resurrection spirit that changed her whole outlook on life.

What would get us to take this kind of life-altering chance? Would we have to be at our lowest ebb before we'd be open to the turning of the tide? Might we see, instead, that more is possible for our lives, through faith, than what we would ordinarily dare to conceive? Does the need for safety and security, comfort and pleasure, keep us from opening our lives to opportunities and possibilities that only those with a daring courage of Mary Magdalene can perceive?

Could it be that we, like Mary, would prefer to "hold on" to those who have made life easier for us rather than venturing out on an adventure that God is calling us to? Is this why Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me?" As much as he had been a blessing to her in changing her life around, she was now a true disciple who had learned to live by the values and virtues that Jesus had taught her. She did not need his continual physical presence in her life for her to live out the lessons and mission that had become a part of her own being. Jesus later reminded all of the disciples that he would always be with them in spirit, but he commissioned them to go out into the world and carry out his purposes without his doing it for them. They were no longer children of the faith, but adults of conviction who were to leave their houses and go out into the world.

If God let you know your life could be transformed, would you take the offer? If it meant trying new things? Helping those most in need? Serving those who might not appreciate it? Putting yourself at risk or in harm's way?

Mary Magdalene teaches us the lesson about how we all, even the least of us, can be transformed and resurrected into an abundant life of love, peace, justice, faith, kindness, hope, compassion, and gentleness. These are the qualities and character traits of Christ – the things we need to live by and follow if we are to be true disciples rather than pretenders.

If Easter is not about the transformation of each of our spirits, then we are underestimating its power. It was not just about Jesus. It was about Mary, who was one of the least of us. And this is good news; for if resurrection could be about her, then most certainly it could be about each and every one of us.

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/12-13/2017