

As Mary Stood Weeping

This glorious Easter morn it is right that we pause and turn our hearts to the central feature of our faith - that thing that resides in the centre of the Resurrection Zone, the centre of the Fullness of Time.

Generally speaking, all four gospels agree on the main points of the events of that last Passover: who discovered the empty tomb – Mary Magdalene and Mary, mother of James, Peter and the “other disciple,” presumably a self-reference of John.

All depict a bodily, physical resurrection of the Lord Jesus. All report the presence of angels at the tomb and then the appearance of the Lord himself. All indicate that this happens early on the morning of the first day of the week, the day after the sabbath.

There are differences too. These first 18 verses of John 20, our lectionary passage for today (it is a blessing that our Lenten series in the Gospel of John now comes back home to the lectionary), do not appear in any of the other gospels.

John’s account has the feeling of a first-person report. The interesting, somewhat light-hearted, detail of a foot-race to the tomb by Peter and John. There is the charming remark about the ***...napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself (v 7).***ⁱ

In the text

Now to our text. I want to focus on the experience of Mary Magdalene, because that is where John focuses. Peter gets about 8 verses (3-10). But this is really about Mary Magdalene, who gets most of the ink (about 10 verses). Thus, my title, ***As Mary Stood Weeping.***

While Peter and John have come and gone and ***...returned to their homes,*** we find Mary still outside, disconsolate.

Four times the text tells us Mary’s highly emotional state. ***As she stood weeping...As she wept...*** (v 11), she bent and looked into the tomb and saw divine beings, ***one at the head and the other at the feet*** of where he had been lying.

They [angels] said, “Woman, why are you weeping?” ... Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” (vss 13, 15)

It is quite poignant.

It is dark out, ***Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark*** (v 1). Matt 28:1 says these things happened “toward dawn”; Mark 16:2 says “early on the first day”; Luke 24:1 says “early dawn”. But John just says it, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb ***while it was still dark.***ⁱⁱ

This darkness has a metaphorical significance for John, that’s why he mentions this fact, while it was still dark. He tells us in v 9 that Peter and ***the other disciple,*** after seeing the empty tomb...***did not yet know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*** The disciples were yet in “darkness.”

I speak to us of Mary because it is only as we reflect on the unspeakable grief of those intimate followers, whose community was shattered on that long sabbath day, their master was dead, the

sleepless night that followed, that we have some inkling of the depth of the darkness that shrouds the tomb on the Sunday morning; the confusion, the incredulity.

When she first turns to someone behind her who asks her why she is crying, she thinks it is the gardener. It's dark out.

Jesus called her name, **"Mary!"** And she turned to him and said **"Teacher!"**

This darkness of night in which the scene transpires is real, but it is a metaphor for the spiritual darkness that lifts with the morning light, the realization of the victory of life over death that has just occurred.ⁱⁱⁱ

And as the sky lightens, the reality of the earth changing event becomes clear. It is the glorious realization that their master has been raised. And creation has been reborn. The darkness shall never overcome the light again.

John 1:1 says: ***In the beginning was the Word... the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.***

As Paul says, ***The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:26).***

But as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:2; Isaiah 64:4).

There is plenty of room for you in my Father's home. If that weren't so, would I have told you that I'm on my way to get a room ready for you? (John 14:2, The Message)

That is the gospel for this Easter morning.

From the Text

What does the resurrection mean for us? What is our part?

Let me tell you about a few things I've learned here over the last 4 ½ years. Naturally, I've been reflecting on my time with you of late. The first thing has to do with community.

Everything I've ever read about wellness says that relationships and community are the key to well being and the enjoyment of life. Be that family or church or volunteer or at work.

When we are socially connected we experience more stable relationships. Our hardships are easier to bear with others around us for support. If we are in a healthy community we are more likely to make positive life decisions and positive choices in our health.

One of the great things about having been here is the restorative effect that this community of faith has had on my life. I came quite tired and worn out by the life journey – decades of professional and personal endeavour. You just get kind of beat up in life!

Even though I have worked hard here, I'm *stronger* than when I came. I think Christine would say that and more. That is because of the healing power of the faith community. The three most important words for wellness: *Stay in community.*

Along side the four most beautiful words in the English language: *I found my sunglasses!*

You may be in one place or another in your journey of life, but come and do it with us in the light of this marvelous gospel, and we can find our way together.

When the weeping Mary turns to answer the gardener who asks her why she is crying, community is restored. Her life begins again on a whole new level. That is real gospel for life. Kate Bowler expresses it this way. Have a beautiful terrible day.

The second thing that has really grabbed my heart is this. Two years ago, we did the *We Believe* series on the Nicene Creed for the season of Easter. Of all that I have learned from my time with you, the most compelling conviction that has emerged is that the Christian church today needs ministry based on the essentials of a creedal faith.

By that I mean the historic centre of the faith which has stood the test of centuries, and allowed the church to live in countless times and various cultures, which is Christianity's great genius. God the Creator, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

And that beyond the creed all things doctrinal and with respect to controversial social mores that arise in societies, all this recedes in importance in relation to the centre. For the centre will hold us, nothing else matters.

Summaries of the Christian faith are rare in the Bible. But here is a good one for this Easter morn:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3-4).^{iv}

That is the centre of the Resurrection Zone; that is the pivot point of salvation history in about 75 words.

As I said last week, it isn't acquiring the ability to suspend your disbelief long enough to accept the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. I have come to believe in the bodily resurrection for many, many reasons. For me it is an honest conviction.

That is not the saving faith of which we speak this Easter morning. We speak of the *faithfulness of Christ*, who showed by his sacrificial death and resurrection that our lives are now a matter of joyous hope, even in a beautiful terrible day.

The reality of it dawns in our hearts, not as we strive to control our brains or gin up belief, but as we open ourselves to the faithfulness of Christ. As we allow that redeeming love to flow into us and forgive our sins and fill us with grace.

Jesus says ***Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life*** (John 6:47).^v Not *will have*, but *has* eternal life.

Amen

Benediction:

And now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for

doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Heb 13:20-21)

Amen

ⁱ And there are other differences between the accounts, such as in the places, the witnesses and the order of appearances (see 1 Cor 15:5-7). This note about the napkin comes up in discussion of the Shroud of Turin, the authenticity of which is not to be accepted.

ⁱⁱ Matt 28:1 “toward dawn”; Mark 16:2 “early on the first day”; Luke 24:1 “early dawn”.

ⁱⁱⁱ ***In verse 9 of our chapter, we have this: 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.***

^{iv} The other summary of the life of Jesus and its significance, a very important passage in the biblical landscape, is Acts 10:34-43 (one of the lectionary passages for the day). Here are the three verses that deal with the resurrection itself, vss 39-41:

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Then we have our blessed Nicene Creed, which is familiar to us, captures this truth:

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.

^v Let’s observe the present tense of the participle and verb (ὁ πιστευων ἔχει ζωην αἰωνιον), that is, the one who believes as a matter of ongoing life choice has (not *will* have), eternal life.