

Loved

John 20: 1-18, Jeremiah 31: 1-6

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“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,
Mary Magdalene came to the tomb”

There is a difference between night and dark. We equate the two—night and dark. Bad things happen at night—thieves break in and steal, black ops operate at night, drunks get drunk at night—but darkness is more than the absence of light. Darkness is like a great weight around the soul. When in the dark, we are alternately weighed down and weightless, moored only by the emptiness of absence.

“The caregivers are all gone now,” my aunt Dottie told my sister last week. “The house is very quiet,” she said. “For the last few years people came in and out taking care of EJ. It was hard having so many strangers in the house, but I miss them now; I miss EJ. The house is so quiet.”

My aunt Dottie is ninety-five years old. At the time of his death two weeks ago, my uncle EJ was ninety-eight, a good long life. “The house is quiet now,” my Aunt Dottie said. I wonder what thoughts fill her quiet days. Time passes so quickly. When I think back about my Aunt Dottie and Uncle EJ, I remember lazy Sunday afternoons—cold watermelon, homemade ice cream, my father and Uncle EJ playing chess; my mother and Aunt Dottie talking quietly while my sisters and girl cousins fussed over pesky younger brothers covered in mud from a nearby pond which held tadpoles and cane thickets. My cousins lived only short distance from us through the woods. We could ride our bikes there or drive down a dirt road and over an old wooden bridge. I wonder if Aunt Dottie thinks about those days gone by. “Time, like an ever rolling stream, Soon bears us all away. We fly forgotten . . . as a dream Dies at the opening day.” I wonder what dreams fill Aunt Dottie’s days.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.”

We don’t know much about Mary Magdalene or Mary of Magdala, a first century city of 40,000 located seven miles southwest of Capernaum and fifteen miles northeast of Nazareth nestled on the shores of Lake Galilee. Though it supported a Jewish population, Magdala was predominately Gentile and known for its shipbuilding, fishing, and brisk trade, a city large enough to support a hippodrome where thousands gathered for horse and chariot racing.

We don’t know when or where Mary of Magdala first met Jesus. Despite the biblical record, which does not make the association, time and tradition has identified Mary as “a woman of the city,” a prostitute from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. The best we can say with certainty is that Mary of Magdala was with Jesus during his itinerate ministry in Galilee; supported him financially; followed him to Jerusalem and was present for his crucifixion. More pointedly, by John’s reckoning, Mary of Magdala was the first to meet the risen Lord. She is the first to announce: “I have seen the Lord.”

Mary didn’t go to the tomb expecting to see the Lord. In fact, when Mary finds the tomb empty she races back to Peter and company concluding that the body has been taken. Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved,” the unnamed Beloved Disciple, (who may be the gospel writer or maybe every disciple), Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb. The Beloved Disciple arrived first. He bent down, looked in, and saw the burial clothes but did not enter the tomb. When Peter arrived, he did what Peter was prone to do—he jumped in feet first. Entering the tomb, he saw the evidence of death, the burial cloth that had been placed over the head of Jesus and other linens “rolled up in a place by itself,” but he did not see Jesus. Only then did the Beloved Disciple enter the tomb. John tells us simply, “he saw and believed,” but then adds curiously, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” No further narrative is given. No explanation, no conclusion, no risen Lord. “The disciples returned to their homes.” That’s all John tells us. “The disciples returned to their homes.” John’s next words are these: “But Mary,” (and the appositive is significant) but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. The disciples left the tomb; Mary remained.

Grief does that. Death brings the awful silence of weeping. Mary has one thing on her mind—find the body; complete the burial. She stands outside of the tomb and stoops to check one more time. Maybe she was mistaken. Maybe the body had been there after all. Maybe she just thought the tomb was empty. When she looks a second time the tomb is still empty except for “two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet”—a strange, peculiar detail, the positioning of the angels—“one at the head and the other at the feet.” The sentinels are not silent. They question Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

Mary is quick and sure with her reply: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary is on a mission—find the body; get the body; complete the burial; that’s the only mission—bury the dead. That’s what we do when our loved ones die—we mourn and bury them—the past is past; whatever might have been is gone; whatever could have been, whatever once was is lost—“forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.” Mary knows that; we know that—bury the dead and get on with it. “Where is he?” Mary demands to know.

Sensing a presence in the early morning light, Mary turns round: “Whom are you looking for?” the Presence asks. Mary supposes the questioner will know; surely the gardener will know, “If you’ve carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Mary had one mission—find the body; complete the burial. That’s what we do—that’s life and that’s death—bury the dead and move on.

“Mary.”

“Teacher.”

How odd. How peculiar. And how common—the calling of a name and recognition of a name called. That was it. Mary heard a voice, but more than a voice, more than a memory. The Presence tells Mary, “Do not hold on to me.” John doesn’t say; he doesn’t tell us: Did Mary latch hold of the Presence; hug the Presence with both arms? The Greek is not much help. It is and it isn’t. “Holding onto” can indeed reference physical embrace; but it may also be read metaphorically as in ‘don’t try to control me; don’t try to manipulate me; define me or manage me.’

“Do not hold on to me,” the Presence tells Mary.

Rowan Williams observes this about the early morning conversation,

“There is a clinging to Jesus that shows itself in the longing to be utterly sure of our rightness. We want him where we can see him and manage him, so that we know exactly where to turn to be told that everything is all right and that he is on our side. We do it in religious conflicts, we do it in moral debates, and we do it in politics. We want to stand still and be reassured, rather than moving faithfully with Jesus along a path into new life whose turnings we do not know in advance.”

“Do not hold on to me.”

The Presence which called Mary, the Voice echoed on this Easter morning cannot be held. The risen Lord is not here to confirm what we already believe. The risen Lord is here to set us free. The risen Lord is here to free us from our puny notions of how things are supposed to be. The risen Lord is here to free us from the past we cannot change; the risen Lord is here to free us for a future we cannot imagine. The freedom the Risen Lord brings begins when we let go of our need to use God. Freedom begins when we let go of our need to be right or sure or wise or certain and put one foot in front of another and follow where God leads. And the ability to do that—our letting go, our freedom to follow resides not in ourselves, not in our strength or wisdom or imagination, but in God whose love catches us when we fall and makes a way when there is no way.

Long ago the prophet Jeremiah reminded the citizens of his defeated city that God does not limit his grace. “The people who survived the sword,” cried Jeremiah, “found grace in the wilderness. When Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love.”

That is the reality of Easter—“God’s everlasting love.” It was true to the people of Israel in Jeremiah’s day; it was true in Mary’s day; it is true today: “You are loved.” That’s what Mary heard in

the silence of Easter morning. She heard it in the Voice calling her by name. “Mary.” The Voice was older than time itself. The Psalmist said it best:

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you” (Psalm 139:15-18).

God’s wonderful love refuses to be held. Try as we might, we cannot hold it, harbor it, or save it. God loves so that we love. We must share it; show it; announce it to the world: “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” And that’s just what Mary did. “I have seen the Lord.”

The room is full this morning because somewhere inside all of us a Voice is calling and has called our name. We cannot hold on to the Voice, we can only respond to the Voice. And when we follow, who knows where the Voice will lead? Who knows what dreams we will dream? Who knows what justice will roll down like an ever flowing stream? Who knows what kindness and mercy will fill the emptiness of our broken and unpredictable hearts? The everlasting love of God cannot be held or contained. It can only be shared. The Presence has called and is calling us by name. The Lord is risen. We love because God loves and first loved us. Amen.