

Resurrection & Healing

Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

NPMC - Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Hymns: VT 333 – Low in the Grave He Lay; VT 359 - Christ Is Alive!

John 20:1-18 (NRSV):

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. ² 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.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not touch 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.’ ” ¹⁸ 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.

Early Sunday Morning by Steph Chandler Burns¹

Remember that time
the time at the tomb
when Mary saw angels
she saw Jesus
but still kept seeking her Lord?
'Why are you crying?'
'They've taken my Lord, and
I do not know to where.'
Until finally she recognized
he hadn't been so far after all.

¹ From: *Resistance*, ed. Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Institute for Mennonite Studies, 2022), 119.

We've come to the long-awaited Easter Sunday. This is the day we sing our loudest hymns full of Hallelujahs, hymns that are all about victory, vindication, and death being overcome for good! This is a day of celebration and joy, as it should be, when we declare, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen, indeed!) And all creation seems to echo this triumph, as winter recedes and warmer days return, with the promise of the new life of Spring all around us.

As we've made our way through the six weeks of Lent, we have focused our worship here at NPMC on different aspects of healing, and the way that it is an ongoing journey. Rather than claiming we are fully healed or that we have somehow arrived at healing, the various stories and reflections we've heard – about healing the land, truth and reconciliation, mental health, death, trauma, and disability – reflect something a bit different. None of these are simple stories of triumph over adversity or pain of various kinds. Anyone who works in healthcare can tell us that! Rather, healing, like growth, is a slow, non-linear, mysterious process that unfolds and refolds and unfolds again, all in its own time.

So what might this understanding of healing have to teach us about resurrection? Following the narrative of Mary Magdalene at the tomb in the Gospel of John, I want to invite us to explore what kind of healing she experiences as she encounters the risen Jesus on that first Easter. My hunch is that we will find something much more mysterious than straightforward victory and triumph in the usual senses of those words.

“While it was still dark”

The story begins in the dark, and that is our first major clue that what we are witnessing isn't quite clear. It's not even clear to Mary Magdalene what she is witnessing, and she is right there! Jan Richardson puts it this way:

While it was still dark.
While it was still night.
While she could not see.
While she thought death held sway.
While she grieved.
While she wept.
While it was still dark, resurrection began.²

In the other Gospels, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by a group of other women, who make the trip together to the tomb with their burial spices. They then become the group of witnesses to the resurrection, able to corroborate each other's stories. But in John, it is Mary Magdalene alone who sets out, fumbling her way through the darkness to the tomb of her dear friend. She was determined, despite the depth of her grief, to provide this one last act of care and anointing for his body. Bible scholar Elizabeth Schrader has made the case that in John, Mary Magdalene is a major, authoritative figure – she's the woman who anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair (John 12) and the only sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus raises from the dead (John 11). So, like happens so often in John, this scene becomes an echo, a repetition of these previous episodes in the gospel – she's come to anoint Jesus (again); she's weeping at the tomb of a loved one (again), only to be a witness to his being raised from the dead (again)!³ Yet even while it's happening directly in front of her, while it's happening to her, Mary doesn't

² Jan Richardson, “While it was still dark,” <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/04/15/easter-sunday-while-it-was-still-dark/>

³ https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/elizabeth-schrader-on-preaching-john?publication_id=47400&fbclid=IwAR2RfaYpvHoPG8NGzqcTHe9JyzYRM-V990sMyCI36GQHmW0O0lr1S_uB7T4#details

seem to recognize what's unfolding before her very eyes. She's the very first witness to the resurrection here, the apostle to the apostles (the first to preach the "good news" or gospel) – but this whole episode is shrouded in darkness and mystery. And yet, we should also remember that creation itself began in the dark; why not the new creation, too?

Seeing or Unseeing?

Trauma theologian Shelly Rambo points out a few different ways in which Mary cannot "see" clearly (also a recurring theme in John) in this passage. She writes,

At the tomb, Mary experiences a series of obstructions to her sight: First, the text tells us that it is still dark outside. Second, she is weeping throughout, indicating that she sees through a film of tears. Third, her look into the tomb is partial[, "a quick, fleeting, or stolen look" in the Greek]. The encounters that she has are encounters in which her sight is limited. In terms of being an eyewitness to the events following the passion, Mary appears to be a rather unsuccessful one. Instead, something is taking place through her unseeing.⁴

So Mary is simultaneously the first witness to the resurrection, and yet she has all of these obstacles to seeing clearly.

This is perhaps why she doesn't recognize Jesus when he appears to her. Through her tears and in her distress at the thought of Jesus' body have been stolen, she mistakes Jesus for the gardener. The other disciples have again fled, not understanding why Jesus' body is not where they had seen it laid to rest. But Mary has remained there, weeping, and speaking with angels, telling them that she doesn't know what is happening: "They've taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." As soon as she confesses that she does not know where Jesus is, he is

⁴ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 83-84, 85.

suddenly standing before her, but she “does not know” it’s him. Even with the “proof” of resurrection standing right in front of her, she does not truly see him, and assumes he is the gardener. It’s not until he says her name “Mary!” That she turns to him and realizes all at once who he is: “Rabbouni! Teacher!” she replies.

But even this moment of recognition is confusing, as Rambo points out. Mary goes through a series of turnings – we’re told several times that she turns toward Jesus when (presumably) she had already been facing him.⁵ This strangely leaves her (and therefore us as the readers) spinning in circles! We’re not sure which way she’s facing and therefore her “seeing” again becomes obscured by this turning away and toward, a dizzying back and forth.

But despite all of these elements of confusion – the mistaken identity, the turnings toward and away, the lack of seeing clearly – Mary is named as the first and initially only witness here to the risen Jesus. But she is a witness in a different way – to something she does not fully see or understand. And that’s the point. She’s witnessing to mystery here, to something that only poetry can name. Or, in Rambo’s words, “She encounters not simply the absence of Jesus, but a mixture of his absence and presence. He is there but not there; he is present in a way she has not known before.”⁶

“Do not hold on to me”

Chrysalis by Melody Newey⁷

Three days of white
threads wound
fine
around
around.

⁵ Rambo, 85-86.

⁶ Rambo, 91.

⁷ <https://exponentii.org/blog/poetry-sundays-chrysalis/>

Three days of light
shrouded linen
fine
white
light woven.

Three days of. . .
“Where hast thou laid him?”
And she thought,
“Are his wings still wet?”
When he said,
“Touch me not.”

The text doesn't say it, but I always imagine that in that moment of recognition, Mary threw her arms around Jesus, her dear friend, incredibly standing before her, speaking her name. And yet the embrace doesn't last long: “Do not hold on to me,” Jesus says, and commissions Mary to go and tell the others what she has seen. According to Jan Richardson, this moment presents a choice to Mary: “would Mary attempt to hold on to Christ and the life she had known, or would she accept his call to leave the empty tomb and proclaim what she had seen?”⁸

This moment reminds us that resurrection, like healing, doesn't mean an erasure of what happened, a kind of return to the way things were before. After all, Jesus isn't about to pick up where he left off and go on with his ministry of preaching and teaching and healing! That's actually Mary and the other disciples' job now; he's already handed that off to them. We also know that Jesus' body, risen though it was, still bore the marks of crucifixion, which he will show to Thomas in the verses that follow. He has for sure died. There is no “going back.” And we know this from experience – even when we have started to heal from grief or illness or trauma, it has shaped us in ways that remain with

⁸ Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2019/04/21/easter-sunday-where-resurrection-begins/>

us, ways that mark us and can't be erased. But they're also not the only thing that defines us.

Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus has been one of "remaining," of loving presence in the midst of everything Jesus undergoes⁹ – from the moment she received healing from him, her financial and emotional support of his ministry, to being the one who stays with him through his crucifixion, death, and burial, even returning to tend to his body on this day. She doesn't flee as the other disciples do, but remains with him and witnesses his pain with compassion, to the very end – and beyond.

Have you ever had someone "remain" with you in this way? Or have you remained with someone, accompanying them, being present with them, through difficult times? I'm reminded of a reflection by Catherine Newman, who volunteers at a hospice, being present to people as they are dying. She uses her old jeans which she has patched and mended in countless ways, as a metaphor for the kind of love this requires: "I am committed to things, even in their tatters and decrepitude. To people. I don't give anybody up willingly, even if they're a little worn at the knees. I will paint your nails even if you are likelier than most people to die later this afternoon. Sometimes when I am bedside while someone is actively dying — we call this 'sitting vigil' — I mend my jeans." It allows her to sit quietly with the person, and offers a poignant parallel to the moment. It's a practice of "visible mending," leading her to ask, "What if we saw gold seams threaded through each other? What if our wounds and grief were lovingly patched in denim and cotton florals? If you have touched a lover's scar in devoted wonder, you know what I mean. Let me frame the damaged parts of you in precious metals! Let me cherish you, broken and pieced together as you are. ... Holy and whole,

⁹ Rambo, 140, 158.

holes and all.”¹⁰ Can we practice remaining with one another in this way? I think, in many ways, we already do.

This Easter day, my prayer is for us to practice and continue practicing this kind of healing, this kind of resurrection, in our lives: the kind that begins in the dark, the kind that is mysterious, that we don’t fully understand, and yet which is not to be clung to, but shared – extravagantly poured out like perfume, like tears,¹¹ like an embrace which takes us in, wounds, scars and all. Like the new life that wells up in us when we thought all was lost, but instead we are lovingly called by name. AMEN

¹⁰ <https://cupofjo.com/2023/01/03/jeans-without-end-catherine-newman/?fbclid=IwAR1t74IMy8B0u6fv9UDpFqkHeUBJvhmpgXGE8VWchLMeTpTEt9ikKrMFdh8>

¹¹ See Alice Connor, *Fierce: Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 174.