

**April 19, 2015**

**TEXT: John 20:11–18**

**TITLE: D.T. & M.M.—Part 2**

The first verse of today's gospel lesson says it all: *Mary stood weeping outside the tomb*. It is Easter morning, dark in the cemetery and in Mary Magdalene's grieving spirit. When she finds that the stone sealing Jesus' tomb has been rolled away, she runs and gets Peter and another disciple. Together they return to the cemetery. The men then run off—something they are good at doing—while Mary stays behind, frozen in place, frozen in grief, weeping outside the tomb.

The most vivid characters in the resurrection stories found in John's gospel are Doubting Thomas and Mary Magdalene. They have much in common with one another and with each of us. Doubting Thomas was out moving around in the world on Easter, so he missed seeing the risen Christ in the Upper Room. When the other disciples did catch up with him and told him the good news, he became fixed in one spot—stubbornly announcing, “Unless I see the wounds on Jesus' hands and side, I will not believe.” He had the courage to be different from the crowd and to say out loud the doubts that others silently carried in their hearts. But he would not budge until finally Jesus appeared to him, opened his eyes, and Thomas too would profess Jesus as “My Lord and my God.” Doubting Thomas' story is a story of God's grace that comes to us when we won't budge, trust or believe.

Mary Magdalene was also moving around on Easter, but she was moving in the shadows—carrying spices to the cemetery, head down, avoiding others, because the one she wished to honor had been crucified as an enemy of the state. She encounters something unimaginable—the tomb has been disturbed, likely robbed, defiled. She just can't take it anymore. The horror, pain and grief of the past few days catch up with her. All she can do is stand and weep. Mary Magdalene's story is a story of God's love—a love that breaks through our grief and paralysis and frees us to move, trust and believe.

We don't know much about Mary Magdalene. I wish she could visit and tell us her story in person. She would likely be amazed, if not horrified about some of the stories the church has told about her over the centuries. She was called Mary from Magdalan, likely a village along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. In Luke 8, we're first introduced to her as one of the group of women who traveled with Jesus and the disciples and “provided for them out of their resources.” So if Mary was helping provide daily food for a group of at least 15 people, she likely was a person of some financial means. The Luke verse also says she was part of a group Jesus had cured of “evil spirits and infirmities,” with seven demons cast out of her. Demon possession in the bible had less to do with devils and more to do with illness. The Syro-phoenician woman's sick daughter and the boy with epilepsy both had their illnesses described as being cured by Jesus' casting out

demons. So whatever infirmity Mary Magdalene had, it more than likely was physical, not moral.

Why does that matter? Because the church (bless its soul) for far too long has suggested that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, a woman of the streets. There's a different story in the bible (Mark 14) about a woman, shunned by others, who literally crept up behind Jesus at a fancy dinner and began washing his feet with her tears and expensive perfume. Jesus shows her kindness and tells the others that she is preparing his body for burial (Mt 26:12). So in time, Mary Magdalene—the one who carried spices to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body in death was wrongly linked with the fallen woman who anointed Jesus' body in life.

But there's a deeper issue here that should be named. The church has too often proclaimed a male-dominated gospel—a story burdened unnecessarily by patriarchy. Out of the many stories told about Jesus, only some of them were captured in the four gospels. And sadly, the world in which they were written down was male-dominated and devalued the experiences of women. Women didn't have the same legal, political or social status as men back then. It can be argued that the same prejudices and imbalance are still present today.

There are many reasons why Mary was frozen in place outside Jesus' empty tomb. She was not only paralyzed with grief. She was trapped in a world that measured power in male-terms, with soldiers and weapons and hierarchies. And suddenly she found herself before a violently disturbed grave of someone she loved—yet powerless in a real way to do anything about it. Because of patriarchy and bias, Mary lived on the margins of the gospel story. Imagine if what you've heard all your life is that you don't matter—that you're second-class, second-rate; that you don't have power, you don't have potential. Because of what we've been told or come to believe about ourselves, we can feel helpless and lost. And no matter how wonderful the good news revealed right before us is, we are stuck in place, weeping alone in the shadows, unsure what to do next.

If the story of Doubting Thomas is a story of grace—because Jesus went the extra effort, came through the locked doors not once but twice, and appeared to Thomas so that he might move from doubting to believing—then the story of Mary Magdalene truly is a story of love. Mary was frozen and confused in her grief that Easter morning. Angels inside an empty tomb couldn't shake her out of it. When they asked her why she was weeping, her devotion to Jesus caused her to fixate on making things right—finding his body, anointing it with the spices she'd brought, and getting that stone back over the tomb entrance. So she told the angels: "They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where to find him."

Just then, Jesus appeared nearby but she didn't recognize him. She shouldn't be blamed for that. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize the risen Christ; and when Peter and the disciples were out fishing and Jesus called

to them from the shore, they didn't recognize the risen Christ either. Once again, Mary is asked why she is weeping, and she tries hard to make things right. She asks this stranger to tell her where Jesus' body is so she can return it to the grave. Put yourself in her place. In a world of patriarchy and male power, women too often believe they must stay in the shadows. In a world of injustice and prejudice, those on the margins learn to survive by staying within the limits society imposes upon them. If your age or sexual orientation or ethnicity or primary language or economic status isn't what the world deems normative, then you learn to survive as best you can in the small space the world gives you. So even when resurrection is right there in front of you, you can't recognize it. You can't imagine such a thing could happen. You are afraid to believe that you might be worthy to benefit from something like that—that your hopes and dreams might come true, that healing and grace and redemption exist for you.

Joanna Adams tells a light-hearted Texas story about two young boys whose mother sent them out to chase a chicken snake out of the henhouse. They looked everywhere for that snake but couldn't find it. The more they looked, the more afraid they got. Finally they stood up on their tiptoes to look on the top nesting shelf and came nose to nose with the snake. They fell all over themselves and one another, skinning their knees and running as fast they could out of that henhouse. "Don't you know a chicken snake won't hurt you?" their momma asked. "Yes, ma'am," one boy answered. "But there are some things that will scare you so bad you'll hurt yourself."<sup>1</sup>

In all our moments of fear and doubt, whether they freeze us in our tracks or make us fall over ourselves getting out of the way, the Easter Jesus comes to us. Out of love, Jesus breaks through all earthly barriers. The stone in front of the tomb meant nothing. The locked door in the upper room meant nothing. Jesus breaks through, not only physical barriers, but emotional barriers. Mary's frantic efforts to get her world back into an old order were no barrier to Jesus and his deep love. All it took was one word—Jesus speaking Mary's name. He called to her to show he knew her, that it was really him, that what she had dared not believe was actually true. The one who'd healed her long ago, unbelievably back then—the one who'd been forced to die on a cross, inconceivably a few days earlier—that same one was alive again, miraculously.

In what part of your own life are you stuck in time—frozen in doubt or worry or captive to what the world has told you is how things must be? Stand in that place for a moment and then imagine Jesus saying your name out loud. Imagine Jesus saying your name out of love. It changes everything. It enlarges what life means right now and for all time to come.

The first verse of this passage told how Mary stood and wept outside the tomb. The last verse tells how Mary moved—how she went and announced to the others, "I have seen the Lord." An act of love by the risen Lord reanimated Mary physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She who was stuck, frozen in place,

outside the miracle zone of God, was now set free at last—to move, to announce, trust and believe. The Easter good news is that Jesus calls to each of us in the same way, calls us by name, out of love so we can move forward at last. So go and catch up with Mary. Announce that you too have seen the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Adams, *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 1996, p. 27.