

Graveyard Mysteries

sermon digest

Easter, April 5, 2015

John 20: 1-18

larry dipboye

“While it was still dark” Mary Magdalene came to the tomb where the crucified body of Jesus had been laid.

The message today is from John, the Fourth Gospel, where darkness and light are never just about what we see with physical eyes. Darkness and light address the human experience of evil and good that one must perceive from the depths of the soul. At the very beginning, in John’s Gospel prologue, he proclaimed: “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:4-5). Jesus had said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12). That is the message of light around which the Gospel revolves.

Early Easter morning, the darkness had won through the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus was dead. Again death triumphed over life.

The other Gospels were satisfied to say that women (plural) came to the tomb after Sabbath, at dawn on Sunday. The Synoptic Gospels include Mary Magdalene, but John builds the entire mystery of Easter morning around the mysterious disciple Mary Magdalene. Raymond Brown notes that her name appears eighteen times in the Gospels second only to Peter, James, John, and Judas. Magdalene is significant in Luke 8 as a woman from whom seven demons had been exorcized; she was a woman of means who along with several others supported the ministry of Jesus. Because this report follows the story of the washing of Jesus’ feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee, later Christians connected the dots to make Mary a woman of the streets. Correggio’s painting of Mary with the risen Christ, in medieval fashion, shows a beautiful, sexy, red-haired woman, sometimes pictured in the nude.

But the mysterious Magdalene disappears from view as quickly as she appears in the Gospels. After Easter, there is no further word from or about Mary Magdalene. This vacuum of information became a favorite playground for later Christians to speculate about her identity as a prostitute, converted from her trade to become a faithful follower of Jesus and even a saint.

In John, Mary alone came to the Tomb, and she came before the Sabbath had ended in the early morning darkness. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunrise on Sunday. Regardless of whether Sabbath was over and dawn had appeared, the story begins in the deep darkness of grief that had settled in on the disciples of Jesus. They had hoped for Jesus to rescue them from the monstrous killing machine called Rome, to bring in a new government on earth in which God alone would rule, the Kingdom of God; but the darkness of evil was too deep and too strong for Jesus, apparently too strong for God. When Mary came to the tomb, the dark evil of death had triumphed over the life of Jesus and had dashed the hope for life in every person on earth. While all of the other followers of Jesus were at home, struggling in the darkness of despair, Mary found her feet. She came to the tomb in the dark no less grieved than the other disciples, but somehow Mary Magdalene alone had found enough energy to make her way to the tomb. We assume from the other Gospels that she came to anoint the body with spices, a labor of love performed on the decomposing body of loved ones.

Here the mystery begins. She found the stone that closed the opening of the tomb removed and determined that the body of Jesus had been stolen and moved. She ran to report her finding to Simon Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.” The unnamed disciple has long been believed to have been the “beloved disciple” John, author of the Gospel.

From our point of view here on Easter morning, which was also John’s point of view writing the story some fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, we would expect an immediate celebration of disciples with a 300 voice choir in the background singing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus”:

And He shall reign forever and ever, King of kings, forever and ever,

And Lord of lords, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

But John’s story is a slowly unfolding graveyard mystery. Mary does not assume the resurrection of Jesus. Her word to the disciples was, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” We have no clue as to the identity of “they.” Perhaps “they” were the

Romans or John's group designation "the Jews," either of whom might want to get rid of the body and any evidence that Jesus had lived. "They" could have been grave robbers hoping to find something of value buried with the deceased. Perhaps "they" were well-meaning disciples, plotting a fraudulent resurrection by the mysterious disappearance of the body; at least, that is the possibility suggested by Matthew (27:62ff). Mary assumed that "they," the enemy, had stolen the body.

The two disciples immediately go to the tomb. The other disciple outran Peter and, before Peter arrived, examined the empty tomb and noted the body shroud and the head wrappings. After seeing for himself, "he saw and believed." We would assume by the importance of the word *belief* in this Gospel and from our post-Easter perch that the other disciple "believed" the resurrection of Jesus. But John observes, "they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." Rather than resurrection, the disciple "believed" Mary's report that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Instead of a bright sunny dawn, the darkness of Sunday morning grew deeper; and the hopeless, helpless state of grief became the new reality with which the disciples must learn to live. With no fanfare, no celebration or proclamation of hope, the disciples resigned: "Then the disciples returned to their homes," the end of the first scene of the Easter mystery in John.

Faith in the resurrection of Christ is a gradual, personal process. In Scene Two, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb. Only in John does Mary visit the tomb twice. This time she looked and encountered angels who asked a somewhat misplaced question, "why are you weeping?" They imply that an empty tomb should compel faith in the resurrection, but it does not. Mary is stuck on the same message, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Only then does she turn to encounter one whom she supposes to be the gardener; he repeats the question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and adds, "whom are you looking for?" Thinking that she has found the antecedent of the pronoun "they," Mary asks the gardener for the location of the body of Jesus. Only when the gardener calls her name does she recognize her Lord. Finally Easter has dawned on Mary Magdalene. She responds with an affectionate title for Jesus, "Rabbouni!" teacher.

The next exchange has produced speculation about the nature of Mary's vision and the physics of resurrection. Jesus says "do not hold me." Given the distance in time between the crucifixion of Jesus and John's Gospel, I suspect that the message was "do not hold onto me; do not cling to past events; live in the present and toward the future."

There is a very important message here for Christians who posit all of their faith in the validity of historical messages from the ancient past and have neither interest nor confidence in the events of their own lives. To be sure, without Easter and the message of antiquity passed down in our Gospels, we would know nothing of the historical Jesus, but the question remains: do we know the living Christ?

The hope of the resurrection grows out of the darkness of Easter morning. "While it was still dark," Mary came to the tomb; and it continued to be dark well after sunrise. I would not have expected this Gospel to note the darkness of Easter morning. Not that John was likely to deny the reality of evil in the world but because he tends to portray a triumphal Christ, I would have expected nothing but bells and whistles on Easter morning, something the way Easter dawns in Christian churches today with people dressed in their finest attire, the choirs singing bright anthems of celebration, accompanied by trumpets and timpani. Over the years I too often have heard people in church warn "never say die." They don't want to talk about the cross, only the resurrection of Christ. They want to avoid the bad news of reigning evil in life and the reality of death to hear only the bright hope of steady victory. But that is not the direction of life or the order in which we experience faith.

For John, the darkness of Friday extends into Easter morning. Perhaps you have heard of the Paschal Vigil in traditional Christian churches, found especially in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The Easter or Paschal Vigil begins between sundown on Holy Saturday and sunrise Sunday morning. The liturgy begins with the lighting of the Paschal candle, the only light allowed to pierce the darkness of the night. That candle continues to stand at the altar throughout the Easter season. The Easter Paschal Vigil dramatized the order of living out of darkness into light, out of death into life eternal.

It was the week after Richard and Jean Dew's son Brad had been murdered. Carolyn and I were asked to join them in viewing a video someone had given them to help them to manage grief. It was a

production showing butterflies emerging from cocoons and seeds bursting into life in the spring to form roots and flowers with all of the beauty of nature at the peak of spring unfolding before the camera accompanied by great classical music in the background. It quoted scripture repeatedly and selectively to assure us that death is the perfectly normal way that life goes that leads to new life and the continuation of the human world. I shall never forget Richard's immediate response. He said, "I guess am not ready to feel sweet." Like everyone I have ever met walking through the valley of shadows, these friends needed time to face the darkness before the light of God's eternal love could come to dawn.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." The mystery of Christ, the mystery of life and death, had left her, like us, in the dark. Gradually, the way life goes, Easter dawned as she encountered the living Christ, who called her away from clinging to a past that is out of our reach regardless of how wonderful it has been.

And Paul would proclaim to the church, "Behold I show you a mystery. . . . Death has been swallowed up in victory."