

Easter Day
Jn 20:1-18
St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco
April 15, 2017

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“Whom are you looking for?”

This joyous Easter day began in darkness and grief. Mary Magdalene arrives before dawn, seeking the quiet comfort of the grave where Jesus’ body would be a visible sign of her loss. Her entire world—all she had valued—had been shattered within a few days. Here she could grieve and try to find meaning—if any meaning could be found. But the body was missing.

After Peter and John respond to her call and then leave for home, grieving in their own way. But Mary stays on, pondering the burial wrappings. What or who could explain what had happened? The wrappings left behind suggested that a transformation had taken place. According to Johannine scholar Robert Kysar, it was a transformation that had consumed the physical body as it had passed through the burial cloth¹ and moved into the spiritual realm.

At first, Jesus does not approach Mary, nor is he immediately recognizable. Only in the way her name is spoken does she come to know him. “Mary!” At once the world of the ordinary and the spiritual coalesce.

Often during times of grief, tragedy, or a loss of meaning or purpose, we can be most open to a spiritual experience or call. Sensing the presence of God or Christ comforts and reassures us that there is life beyond the grave, or that our tangible world is not the limit of all existence. Spiritual encounter also helps us move forward, sometimes instilling purpose or commitment to our lives—occasionally turning us completely around. Mary’s encounter with Jesus as the risen Christ transformed her grief into new purpose:² she was charged by Jesus to share the most important aspect of the Christ event: God’s showing forth that death is not the end, that evil does not triumph over goodness, and that by manifesting God’s love as we are taught through Christ to do, we too become reconciled with God.

But there’s another message in Jesus’ encounter with Mary Magdalene: a message of radical equality and universal love. All of the gospels point out that women are the first witnesses to the Resurrection. Jesus’ telling Mary to bear witness rejects women’s limited status in society,³ and makes clear the radical and transformative role that Christianity offered to women.

This inclusivity involved not just gender, but also other ways in which people have been marginalized. In this morning’s reading from the Book of Acts, Peter is speaking in the home of Cornelius, a soldier in the occupation of Palestine. Peter, a Jew, transgressed Jewish law by

¹ Robert Kysar, *John. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986, p.297.

² Kysar, p.299.

³ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979, pp.204-5.

visiting and socializing with a gentile,⁴ just as Jesus had crossed the boundaries of exclusion throughout his ministry between Jews and others, between those thought to be clean and unclean, and others who were considered to be outcasts. As Peter expressed to Cornelius and the others, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (v.34). All who do what is right are acceptable to God.

But the church hasn’t always heeded this Easter message of equality and inclusivity. Although Mary Magdalene came to be seen by a number of sources as the Apostle to the Apostles,⁵ and women held key roles in the early church, it didn’t take long for women to become marginalized as the church expanded and institutionalized. Christ’s message of radical inclusivity and reconciliation has been overlooked or forgotten in other ways as well.

When I taught in theological school I continually encountered students who, despite having been deeply wounded by their faith community as children or as adults, still longed for spiritual connection and relationship. Despite their pain, something had not died. Many found in Christ a new sense of connectedness—and a commitment to sharing Christ’s message of inclusiveness. Some worked within their own denomination to break down barriers and change the church; others moved to a different denomination where they would be accepted, so that they could live out their commitment.

On my own spiritual journey, I’ve found my sharpest awareness God’s presence during times when I have felt on the margin. It is easy to ignore the inner spiritual nudge when we are in the mainstream of building a career, exploring adulthood, or starting a family. But through times of tragedy or uncertainty, when we lose our sense of meaning, or otherwise are thrust out of the mainstream, the spiritual life offers strength and purpose. It also has helped me accomplish what I never could have done on my own.

My own spiritual path eventually took me to seminary. But as a female Episcopal candidate for priesthood, I ironically was assigned to a Roman Catholic church for a year of clinical pastoral work. There, I was a complete outsider. The only pastoral work I could do involved going to Mass and talking with people during the coffee hour, which I later nicknamed the “ministry of hanging out.” I was permitted take Communion as part of the pastoral team, under a rubric of spiritual necessity. But talking with people was more challenging. Most were recent immigrants from Latin America and spoke only Spanish. The rusty Spanish I had learned in school was completely inadequate. I felt their patience and grace as they listened to my clumsy efforts to communicate.

The months passed. On Easter day, I joined the procession up the aisle to receive Communion. But into my outstretched hands, instead of a wafer, the pastor placed the silver paten holding the wafers. As he gazed at the unusually full church, he whispered, “Give these out. I need to go consecrate more.” Then he left. Alone, feeling bewildered, perhaps a bit like Mary Magdalene that Sunday morning, I faced the line of people waiting for Communion. I, an outsider, was entrusted with Christ’s Body (bread) to share. One by one, I distributed the Body. The pastor

⁴ Chris Haslam “Comments” <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/aeasdm.shtml>

⁵ Swidler, p.209.

then returned and stood at my side. Together we offered the Body of Christ until all were fed. Miraculously, no one refused to take the sacrament, nor did anyone switch lines to take the sacrament only from the pastor.

For me, three miracles happened that morning. I realized that neither denominational nor gender differences can keep us from sharing the body of Christ with one another. Christ is truly inclusive. Second, when we look beyond what separates us, we become open to where Christ may be at work in our midst--often at the margins of where we expect it. And third, the Christ that appeared to me in what happened that morning became a lifelong commitment to ecumenism and the many ways we can help make the world a place where all may feel and live out God's radical and inclusive love.

We, ourselves, are not Christ. We are all human, with our many limitations. But when we live into the way that Jesus set before us, something else can work within us and through us, which can transform lives—and the world. Easter is a message of radical equality and universal love, which had been expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It's a message that resurrects hope, manifests presence, and entrusts us to carry forward God's transformation and reconciliation in the world.

In the words of our reading from Colossians, if we *seek* the spiritual life through Christ, then we must stay focused on the *way* of Christ. When this happens, Christ becomes revealed through our actions. We also will be revealed as an agent of God's purpose (Col.3:4). Amen.