

“Found”

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Reading: John 20.1-18

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

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ 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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to 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.”’ 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.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

There are some questions that arise from this story....

Much as we love the Easter story and its bold declaration of new life, we have to admit that for many of us sitting here, it seems to assume a type of believing which is hard to affirm. For some there may be a bit of embarrassment, and reluctance to wrestle it down to a fine point. The narrative of Christ's resurrection raises the largest possible questions of belief and doubt, because it is the absolute centre of Christian faith.

Even so, religious writer Martin Copenhaver says this isn't necessarily a problem, certainly not a deal-breaker.

'Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us,' he writes. 'So we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.' (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2. p374)

Perhaps we can invite those very large questions to surround us and to animate our sense of the mystery of Easter, while we pose more particular questions to this story.

We might first ask, why has Mary Magdalene come to the garden? She isn't bringing anointing spices, as in the other gospel accounts. In this version of the story from the Gospel of John, the body of Jesus has been laid in the tomb three days earlier by our old friend Nicodemus, the one who asked *What do you mean, born again?* Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea have wrapped the body in linen with 100 pounds of embalming spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. So Mary isn't coming to tend to the body, but simply to visit the grave, to be nearby. She comes before dawn – and we can imagine that perhaps she hasn't been sleeping well, and decides just to get up and go.

Her somewhat irrational sense that she will be comforted by physical proximity to his buried body is easy enough to relate to. Visiting a gravesite is a very common human practice, around the world and through the millennia. Almost universal. The quietness of a cemetery can be a source of consolation. Because she loved him, she wants to be near his body as she slowly takes it in that he has died.

Next question: why doesn't she just run away with the men when it becomes clear that the grave really is empty? When she discovers the stone removed and calls the men, in the passage that Doug read, she persists in assuming someone has moved him. Somehow the stunned exclamations of Peter and the other disciple, and evidence of discarded linen wrappings do not penetrate her consciousness. Now, even when she sees two angels seated inside the tomb, she holds on to her idea. Despite her weeping, she's like a terrier. I was sure he was here. I don't know where he is now. Just tell me where he is. Indeed she is so fixed on finding him as he was, that she isn't able to see him as he is.

And of course, that is the next question, why can't she recognize him? Apparently, he looks very different now, and she thinks he is the gardener. Risen, he is hard to see. It is his voice that delivers the new reality. Mary, he says. And when he calls her by her name, she is able to see him and respond to him. Found.

Last question for now – why isn't she allowed to touch him? Some translations say, don't cling to me. It's as if he is saying to her, this isn't finished yet. Don't try to grab this reality and pin it down, let the vitality of this renewal continue to unfold. In the language of the Gospel of John, *I am ascending to my God and your God.*

And that takes us back to original, bigger questions ... the faith we have, or don't have, or used to have, or wish we had

Don't know if you have seen some of the articles and books around now about the forgetfulness that comes with normal aging. One book I have shows a picture of a woman with her glasses on her head, titled, *Where Did I Leave My Glasses?* Only funny if you are under forty.

There can be an element of this with our faith though, as with Mary in the garden. She knows where she left the Lord, but now she can't find him. It's as if we take our faith and put it down at some point. Maybe just neglected, possibly dead. Then something happens, a life change, good or bad – a birth, a death, a job loss, a lottery win, a bad diagnosis, a new love – something that shakes us up. Something that sends us searching for our faith. And lo and behold, it isn't there. The things we believed, the way we understood God's love, the words and rituals of a church service, the sense of meaning and connection – they just don't seem to be where they used to be. I know I left it here, but now, nothing. Where is it? Easy to give up at that point.

What this story of Mary Magdalene in the garden suggests is this: that old faith you set down, it's **not** there now, that's just a bit of old linen.

But this story also says, your faith will have new life. Its vitality will arise again, *but* it may be unrecognizable. You may find you believe differently, that you experience God's presence in a completely new way.

And how will you know? You will be addressed by your name. Look at the sky. Do something for someone else. Spend a quiet moment as if you were praying. And listen for your name. This faith will not be borrowed or inherited, but your own. Found.

But don't cling to it, says the story. For the reality of God's love and goodness will always be greater than our faith. The endless renewal offered by the risen Christ will always be more wonderful than we can imagine. And for this we give thanks.

Let us pray,

*God of grace, Holy Mystery,
you are greater than all the stories we can tell of you.
Give us eyes to see you risen,
and ears to hear you call our name. Amen.*