

Easter Morning

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹⁰Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Rob Bell, the founding pastor and preacher at Mars Hill Church in Grandville, MI brings this marvelous thought to this story for this morning.

It must be such a letdown to rise from the dead and have your friends not recognize you. (*Velvet Elvis*, p. 156).

The story told by John the writer of the fourth Gospel has so many marvelous details and one that has always struck me as wonderfully odd is this one. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb a second time. She had been there earlier. She saw that the stone that was there to secure Jesus' dead body against body snatchers or thieves had been rolled away and the guards gone.

She went running back to tell the other disciples. They ran to the tomb to see for themselves. They looked in and saw that the linen cloths that were wrapped around Jesus' dead body were lying on the stone that had held Jesus' body. The cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was neatly folded and lying by itself. A simple unassuming detail the meaning of which is not clear except to note that if someone had stolen the body, they would not likely take time to fold the linen cloths before heading out into the night with a naked body!

The body was not stolen. It was raised from the dead. Which will become clearer as Easter day moves on into the evening.

Mary just stands there. The disciples head back home in utter confusion. But Mary just stands there. To grieve, I suppose. She weeps. We don't know of any other motive for her to be there but for her to see if what she saw earlier was still the case. Mary stood weeping, it says in John's telling of the story.

Mary Magdalene is from the town of Magdala in Galilee. She was with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry which began up north in Galilee. In the Gospel of John we hear that

Jesus' ministry lasted three years--three Passovers--as he describes it. So this is the end of a three year journey and her grief was deep and profound.

Was she just dreaming when she looked into the tomb earlier? Were her eyes fooling her? Was it still too dark so "early in the morning"?

Through her tears, Mary peeks again into the tomb, but this time she sees two men, two angels, the story says. Dressed in white, it says. And they say, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Still believing that there has been a theft, she says, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him."

Then she turns and sees Jesus. He repeats the angels' question, "Woman, why do you weep." Only she doesn't know it is he. Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, "Sir..." That word in Greek is the same word for "Lord" as it is in Spanish. Señor can mean "Lord" as in La Viña del Señor" the name of our Latino Congregation which was here at 5 in the morning. Or it could mean "Mister" or "sir". "Lord, if you have taken the body, let me know where it is so that I may take him and give him a proper burial."

Supposing him to be the gardener.

Here is Rob Bell's important observation. "It must be such a letdown to rise from the dead and not have your friends recognize you."

And Jesus, whom she thinks is the gardener, said to her, "Mary."

And she replies, "Rabbouni."

Pythagoras said, in 500 BC, "The beauty of music isn't created by the notes, but in the spaces between the notes." That is also the real secret of Jazz. It is also the painful reality of singing in a choir. Paying attention to the rests in a sheet of music can be maddening. But the genius of music is just there in the pauses. At least that's what members of our Band of Praise tell me. I'm always ignoring the rests. I always come in too early or too late.

So it is that the genius of comedy exists in a sense of timing—a dramatic pause between words at the end of a joke. So is the genius of story-telling.

And now to the point: there must have been an extraordinary pause between the two words, "Mary" and "Rabbouni."

It just couldn't have been as quick as the text seems to make it sound. "Mary/Rabbouni."

Like two businessmen had met in the hallway. "John!" "Bill! How are things? The kids? The wife?"

There are no **stage directions** in the Gospel text. There had to have been a pause there, and into that pause we could fit an entire universe of meaning and hope.

"Mary"

A long moment of distant recognition. Mary is not looking at the Gardener, I think. Her eyes are filled again with tears. She's looking at the grass under her feet. She hears this voice uttering her name. "Mary."

She looks up at a point between the grass and the face of the gardener. Pauses there to consider the uttering of her name.

Confused at first.

Disoriented. The recognition has to take some time.

In that moment, she has to reconsider her theory that the body has been stolen as she stares at that middle space between the grass at her feet and the face of the Gardener. She has to rethink all the next steps she needs to take in order to give her friend Jesus an honorable resting place. Can you grasp for a moment all the “stuff” that had to have gone into that instant between those two words, “Mary” and “Rabbouni”?

She looks at the gardener, stares deeply into those eyes; lets her own eyes clear and then says perhaps more as a question than a statement, “Rabbouni?”

I just think that this is one of the great moments in Gospel history.

The space between the words “Mary” and “Rabbouni” could account for every heartbreak,

every disappointment,

every terror of the human heart resolved in the uttering of a name.

In that space between Mary and Rabbouni is everything we believe.

In that space between Mary and Rabbouni is this extraordinary claim of the Christian faith.

That all that we thought of as the way things are have been undone. The old order of things has been broken. Our cynicism about life is dramatically reassessed. Things don't have to be this way. Empty tombs don't have to be explained by stolen bodies.

Maybe God is somehow at work to make all things new!

Maybe what we have become adjusted to doesn't have to be the end of the story.

Maybe justice **can** be done for the poor and the broken after all.

Maybe the proud **have** been scattered in the imaginations of their hearts after all.

It may well be that the powerful **have** been brought down from their high thrones and those of low estate **have** been lifted up.

Maybe the hungry **have** been filled with good things and the rich **have** been sent away empty.

Maybe all of this Gospel story is **true** after all!..

And it is in this silence between “Mary” and “Rabbouni” that we are given to think about all these extraordinary things.

Clarence Jordan was a Christian civil-rights crusader, who founded an interracial community in Georgia called *Koinonia Farms*. He was shunned by the culture all around him. Threats were made on his life.

But he persevered. In 1969, Clarence Jordan died of a heart attack. Not one of the local funeral directors was willing to help with his funeral out of either prejudice, or fear of violence so he ended up being buried in a plain cedar box on a hillside near his farm.

Jordan's friend, Millard Fuller, the founder of *Habitat for Humanity*, officiated at the funeral. When everything had been said, and nearly everything done, it was time to lower the casket into the ground. Just as this was happening, Fuller's two-year-old daughter stepped up to the grave and began to sing. She sang the only song she knew: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Clarence, happy birthday to you."

As Fuller later told the tale, it seemed to all present that the Lord was somehow behind that innocent, childlike song. For what they had all been celebrating that day, on a Georgia

hillside, was not a death after all: but a wonderful, glorious rebirth. *[Thanks to Carlos Wilton for this illustration]*

All that happens in the space between “Mary” and “Rabbouni.” The pauses are where real meaning happen, where new life explodes into being. Happy Birthday, indeed.

But ours is a noisy world that has little patience for pauses. That’s why God commands a day of rest. So that we might think about the mighty things that God is doing in our midst. And so that we might have the leisure to listen to a two-year-old sing “happy birthday to you” in a profound celebration of new life in the face of the certainties of death itself.

And to allow, for a moment, the possibility that God is doing a new thing in our midst and that all the old ways that we have adjusted to can be broken after all. In this lies our Easter hope. In this lies the whole hope for the world.

In the space between the notes. In the small space between “Mary” and “Rabbouni”
Amen.