

Mary Stood Weeping, John 20:1-18, Easter Sunday, 3/27/16, NM

Beginning

The Easter Story truly stands alone and apart from all the rest of The Bible, even though it clearly fulfills and accounts for much of what both precedes and follows it. Over the years many well-meaning people have asked Christians, *Why it is that your faith must rest on something so patently false? Why isn't enough that Jesus was an extraordinary prophet and an unmatched miracle-worker? Why insist on this extra bit, this Easter Resurrection story? Why must you say that he was The Son of God who came back from Death so we might know God is real and Heaven awaits us?*

But, the questions contain their own response. We insist upon it because we believe - are convinced - that that is what happened. What we are engaged in - what Christian faith is all about - is coming to terms with that reality and living accordingly. And if someone presses the point, all we can really do is refer them to the Gospels.

All the evidence is there. The testimonies have been recorded for us to read and judge. I do not - as a Christian Minister - expect people who practice other religions - or people who choose to practice no religion at all - to have read The Bible. And really, most Christians don't have a lot of time to read Scripture at home. But I do think it's a shame, because it really is an extraordinary book. The OT as well as the NT. But the parts about Jesus, what he said and did, and what happened to him are really the best parts. And within that, the parts about his resurrection and the meetings he then had with the disciples are the best of the best.

I say that, not because they're about the Resurrection per se, but because they are so suffused and infused with the shattering power of those experiences. The confusion of the people involved, the shaking of their hands, the pounding of their hearts. Their excitement! It's all there. And though I have read them -

many times now - I am always a little bit shaken by the enduring power of their conviction. That then is the answer. We insist on The Resurrection because of the force of the Gospel accounts and the majesty of what they imply about the nature of reality.

Middle

Easter is about Hope. But more than just being about Hope, it is about finding Hope in hopeless places. And when we allow ourselves to recognize and understand what happened to those people we can only stand in awe. For this was having your Ultimate Hope fulfilled when you thought all had been lost. When all you believed in seemed to have been a farce. Had been false. When you had finally seen - spirit cannot triumph over steel and violence will always destroy innocence, and hatred defeats Love.

I doubt that any of us can imagine or project the depth of the despair Jesus' followers experienced as they watched him die on a Roman cross. There was nothing noble or redeeming about his death. He died as one of many - hung between two criminals. We often imagine the scene with three crosses set side by side, but it occurred to me recently that the text doesn't really say there were only three crosses. He might as easily - and more likely - been one of many crosses set out that week, and just happened to be between two thieves.

Many of those who stood witness that day were women. The gospels don't tell us how many women, but the fact is that Jesus counted a number of women among his followers and we know that some of them were part of his inner circle. He was unique in that way. For though he lived in a paternalistic society, he had a deep and visceral respect for women.

A couple of examples that come to mind are first, his rescue of the adulterous woman. Saving her from stoning by invoking the collective conscience of the crowd. Have you ever considered how extraordinary that was? Generally, when a public speaker incites a crowd it is to violence. It's a well-known thing that's

been true since crowds have gathered. But inciting a crowd to forgiveness. That's something else again. Something that would take an ability to call men and women to be their own higher selves. That's what Jesus did.

And again, when the hemorrhaging woman touched his robe? Once, when he was in the middle of a large crowd he said, *Who has touched me and drawn power from me?* Well his bodyguards said, *Are you kidding Rabbi? Everyone is touching you, we're in the middle of a crowd!* All of a sudden a woman fell on her knees in front of Jesus, right there in the street, and said, *Oh, Lord. It was me! I have been bleeding for many years. I can't go out anymore and my husband wants to leave me! But I knew that if I could but touch the hem of your garment, I would be cured. So I touched you from within the crowd. I am so sorry.* But Jesus just looked down at her and said, *Your faith has made you well. Go in peace.* No hard questions. No judging going on at all. Just, Go in peace. That kind of understanding of women and their problems was unique in his world.

Among the women said to have been witnesses at the Cross were his mother, the mother of James and Joses, and Mary Magdalene. Many of the men were already in hiding. Wanted - or so they thought - by the authorities. So the women took on the responsibility of witnessing his pain. It's the same reason that Mary Magdalene went to tend the tomb.

There are two interesting things here. The first is about Mary Magdalene and the other is about that tomb. Tradition long held that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. A fallen woman. But the fact is that the gospels don't say that. Here's what it says:

Luk 8:1-3 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

The key phrase is *out of their resources*. There was one kind of woman in traditional Hebrew society likely to have independent means, and they weren't prostitutes. They were widows. Widows held a unique place within Traditional Hebrew society. Widows - by definition - had grown beyond the controlling reach of male relatives. They were no longer virgins and so required no chaperoning. They would have inherited the estate - or some significant portion of the estate - of the husband, which gave them wealth of their own. How they used that wealth was entirely up to them, unless they chose to defer to grown sons or other adult male relatives. Biblical scholars generally agree that Mary Magdalene and most of the other women in Jesus' retinue, were widows. Some may also have been businesswomen, but all had money and property and apparently used it to support Jesus and his ministry.

We know for sure that Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' special favorites. So much so that there have long been whispers that suggested they were married. However there's no real indication of that. Nevertheless, her prominence in the Easter Accounts tell us as clear as can be that she was important. She was also the first to meet the Risen Lord. And the first to recognize her friend Jesus as The Christ of God.

What resonates most in the gospel record of what happened after The Crucifixion are the details. The little things that are embedded in the narratives that give them a sense of immediacy. These are accounts of lived experiences rather than stories concocted to convince the faithful.

The second thing I wanted to mention is about the tomb. Most poor people in those days did not have tombs of their own. And the remains of executed criminals were not buried at all, but were dumped over the city walls for the buzzards to dispose of. It is altogether extraordinary that Jesus was buried in the private tomb of a wealthy family. And yet that one circumstance made all that followed possible.

Made it possible for the women to find Jesus resting place. And made it possible for Mary to turn back and see first the angels and next the gardener. How realistic is that? She thought he was the gardener! But it tells us something that's confirmed later in the story. That after The Resurrection Jesus was still Jesus, but he had changed. Sometimes the Risen Lord looked like Jesus...the person they had known in life...and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he was right there among them and they didn't know him at all. So it was that Mary only recognized Jesus when he was ready to be recognized. At first she could only stand, helplessly weeping. But then...

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.'"

End

Easter is about finding hope in hopeless places. About having your ultimate Hope fulfilled when you thought all had been lost. If there has ever been a time when humanity needed hope, now is that time. Jesus is that hope, not because I or anyone else says so, but because it's true. His story is unique among all the stories of all the prophets and holy ones we have ever known or heard about. As Christians, we do not accept the story lightly or easily, any more than the disciple Thomas did...he who needed to touch the wounds before he would believe the person standing in front of him was Jesus. But even more than all of that, we believe because we must believe. We believe because no other hope meets our desperate need.

All my life I've been taught that each successive generation believes themselves to be the most challenged of all generations, and likewise that all of them have been wrong, because in fact the problems they've faced have always been essentially the same. Poverty, warfare, pestilence, disease...personal relationships, parenting, social order...progress, culture clash...unfulfilled ambitions. All of them have haunted us since the beginning of time.

But today I have come to realize that all of my teachers...everyone who taught me that every generation of humanity is essentially the same...were wrong. Every generation's challenges are not the same. Once you see it, it becomes obvious. Circumstances are always changing and evolving in obvious and subtle ways. Now the pace of change is so accelerated that we would have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to see it, but in fact it's always been true. Everything is changing all the time.

It seems to me that we're in danger of being overwhelmed by this change. Not only has the pace quickened, the stakes have grown until we can no longer face them squarely without fear. Everything is at risk, and who among is prepared to be responsible for everything?

We need Easter. If we are to win this war, we need to be able to believe that victory is possible.

Jesus' resurrection...his metamorphosis into The Risen Christ...his victory over sin and death...is The Ultimate Victory. It is - whether we realize it or not - the reason we can live and thrive and build the future, knowing that we will not be able to share it. Somewhere within us...within each human heart and mind and spirit is the knowledge that at the Heart of Reality there is a miracle. That miracle is a Loving God, who has set the Universe in motion and kept it going with force of will and the power of Love. But God also needs us. We may not know why, but God needs humanity's contribution.

Christ's story tells us that we can win. No matter how hopeless or desperate things may seem. It tells us too what must be done. We must have an unshakeable faith. We must believe in something greater than ourselves. We must have an endless perseverance. We can never give up. No matter what the odds against us may be, we cannot give up. We must have complete solidarity. We stand together. Always. The bonds that bind us one to the other must be unbreakable. We must have courage. Courage enough to live as he lived and if

need be, to die as he died. And we must have Love. Love enough that it can be extended even to The Enemy that opposes us.

Mary Magdalene, in the extremity of her distress...having lost all that she had loved and hoped for...stood weeping at the tomb of her Teacher and Friend. When he spoke to her, she thought he was the gardener. But he wasn't the gardener. He was Christ and he had returned to bring Hope unforeseen...Hope when all had been lost. Her Hope is now our Hope. And it means that what we do here today matters more than we can possibly know. For the world can yet be saved. And we know, there is a place for us, long prepared, in a world beyond the world. In a time beyond time. Where all will be well.

And all God's People did say...