

SERMON
“The Staying Power of Easter”
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April 4, 2010
Easter
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 65: 17-25

John 20: 1-10

Use for enactment in Narthex

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 toward 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 wrapping 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.

John 20: 11-18

Use as scripture reading

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 around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.

SERMON

There are so many stories within the story of John’s account of Easter. There’s the foot race of two disciples trying to out-run each other to the tomb. I love that scene in John’s Easter story, but it is not the one that vied for space in this sermon. The story-within-the-story upon which we will focus today, is the story of Mary Magdalene. She, who goes alone in Easter darkness, to the tomb.

So who is this Mary who seems to ignore the fact that this has been a particularly violent and bloody week in Jerusalem? Particularly violent and bloody...for Jesus. And if the authorities did what they did to Jesus, what might they do to Jesus’ followers? And make no mistake about it, Mary has been following Jesus since Galilee. At least that’s what Luke would have us believe, but this is John’s Easter story.

Mary Magdalene does not appear in John’s gospel until we get to the cross. “Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. These three women, and the beloved disciple of John’s gospel, were the ones with “staying power” in the gospel of John---the ones who stuck by Jesus to the bitter end. They are the ones with a rock solid faith that does not desert when the going gets rough.

Then, there she is again, alone this time, making her way in the dark...defying or indifferent to the danger.

Even though John does not mention Mary before this, with the Magdalene attached to her name, there are those who believe she was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This could certainly be so since the Magdalene of her name simply designates that she was of the district of Magdala, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Which could mean, if she is the sister of Martha, then she is

the Mary of the Martha-Mary story of Luke, but that's mixing up the gospels again. Let's not do that today. Let's keep it simple and only look at the Mary Magdalene that John give us. And let's try not to blanket her in the myths or assumptions that she was a prostitute, or wife of Jesus, that often covers the truth of her story—the truth that this lone woman's staying power suggests... great love.

Mary Magdalene has long been an archetype for me. An archetype is the ideal or classic example of something that becomes the original pattern after which we model our lives. And Mary of Magdala's love for Jesus stands out as the type of love to which I aspire. She is the one, I have come to believe, who loved Jesus *fiercely*. I want to feel and live her love. I pray for a love as fierce as hers. At points and for moments, I think I have loved him this intensely —**for in those moments he has whispered my name.**

But that's my story. Let's get back to Mary's story. She watches a man die that she loves fiercely. Some of us can relate. The one that reaches out to her and loves her, she watches die the most agonizing of deaths. I doubt she slept much that night. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, while it is still dark outside, she decides that to be closer to his dead body would be better than struggling though a sleepless night.

Mary's story, in John, does not have her going out to anoint Jesus' body. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with spices and in linen cloths. Mary comes for another reason.

When people go through grief, they often report what a huge achievement it is just to put "one foot in front of the other." To keep on keeping on becomes a great achievement in itself. Perhaps that's the way Mary went to the tomb that first Easter. You know, I doubt fear even crossed Mary's mind. When someone we love dearly and deeply dies, we...are...numb. We're

in shock. It's as if we are walking in a daze. "If it's dangerous to go be with him, then so be it. Who cares?" You just know that in order to take your next breath, you need to feel his closeness. Whatever the cost!

Her staying power now comes from a deep, primeval place. This is more than the staying power of the ones who stick by to the bitter end. This is more than a love of loyalty. This is the action of a broken, bleeding heart. "She loved him so!" Oh, to love him that much...if only in our imaginations.

The final hope, that rests in a dead body, is taken from her when she finds the stone rolled back and the tomb empty. She ran. To Peter and the beloved disciple. She ran. Now, I would love to change the story here to one of those Hollywood moments when Peter and the beloved disciple hold her in their arms, console her, and walk back with her to Jesus' tomb...but that's not what happens. Instead, the two disciples get into a foot race to see who can get to Easter first. Then they race back to Jerusalem to tell of the news.

But not Mary. She lingered. She stayed. Her staying power kicks in again. She is beyond devastated. She erupts into sobs as she bends over to look into the tomb. (*Bend over. Straighten up with a hand over my mouth. Bend over and look in again.*) You know what's in that cave? Two angels all decked out in white!

(*Bend down to look again.*) And they say to her, "Woman why are you weeping?"

"They have taken away the man who turned my life around. First they kill him and now even his dead body is missing. And I do not know where to find him."

A woman told me once about a dramatic conversion that happened in her life. I think, but I'm not certain, you know how memory goes with age...I think her name was Mary Magdalene, but it could have been Anne Lamott. Belief had been a problem for her. "She

moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.”¹ She grew up in some place called Tiburon in California, or was it Tiberias in the district of Magdala. She was a child born into wealth and nobility. Her parents were religious, but not very spiritual. You know. They did all the religious traditions. They attended services, especially, for all the high holy days. It put more oomph in the holidays. They even gave to the poor, participated in the civil rights movement, and tried their dead level best to make the world a better place. But to say they loved the Lord, their God—well, that would be a bit of a stretch. So Mary, or Anne, grew up not too overly-concerned about religious life. She abandoned herself to drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll. She lived the fun party life, until the fun life owned her.

Then one day she heard gospel music coming from a church in the not-so-good part of town to which her fun life had taken her. It was a homely, ramshackle of a church, but, oh...the music that was coming from it. She drew closer to get a better listen. Eventually she bends over to look into the church. (*Bend over. Straighten up with a hand over my mouth. Bend over and look in again.*) You know what’s in that church? A choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking white man making all that glorious noise, and a congregation of thirty or so people radiating kindness and warmth—sort of like angels do! Others may have run off to try and raise money for this poor black church. But Anne, she just stayed—for she had fallen love.

Or was it to luxurious pleasures and an extravagant lifestyle that she abandoned herself?—had lost her true self in the allure of wealth? Until...her good life owned her. Then one day, a man came to her village and freed her of her demons---and released in her this overpowering love she didn’t know existed. A love that carried with it a staying power that lead her right up to this moment in a tomb with two angels.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 3. Ideas taken from “Verture: Lily Pads,” pp.3-55.

Then in the light of that moment he whispered her name, “Mary!” She turned.
“Rabbouni!” (Teacher!) I like, no *I love*, the love story of Easter. How about you? Then stay
awhile and fall in love. “For they shall not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain,” says God. For
there, “love is Lord of heaven and earth”—a love greater than you ever imagined possible.

Amen.