

Easter Day

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Easter 2024: John 20.1-18

Early – so early that it was still dark Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. And in the early-morning gloom, Mary sees that the massive, flat-based wheel of stone has been heaved back from the entrance. She can only imagine one reason; the violation of his precious body has continued. It must have been grave robbers. Suddenly, there's something she *can* do for Jesus again; get the others and recover his body.

She brings them and what they find is strange. The linen wrappings are lying on the body-bench in the tomb, and the cloth that covered Jesus's head is in another place. Would grave robbers leave these cloths behind? One of the disciples sees all this and believes, but what he believes, we aren't told. Then the two men go home.

Magdalene stays. Again, she's alone in her grief, weeping outside the tomb. Then stooping to look inside again, she sees two angels sitting one at either end of Jesus's body bench. They ask her, *Woman why are you weeping?* She tells them her new grief, but then turns to find *him* standing there. But she doesn't recognise him. He asks her the same question the angels did, *Woman why are you weeping?*

She assumes he's the grave-yard caretaker – the only person you might find there so early – and she asks him if *he's* removed Jesus' body. Why *doesn't* she know it's him? ... There are other times in the gospels after Jesus has been raised where his other close friends don't recognise him. It's something about Jesus himself; at once different, yet very much himself. We'll see this over the coming weeks.

Magdalene is the first to confront this bewildering mystery.

One moment, she's consumed with grief; the next, Jesus calls her by her name. Suddenly he's got his hands full managing her joy. *Stop holding on to me* – trying to prise her loose.

The Gospels are written by eye-witnesses who couldn't believe, but then they did. They tell us that Jesus rose from the dead physically. Some people have no trouble believing this; that Jesus rose and you could physically touch him; sit down and eat with him. Such faith exists; it's not escapism or empty-headed naivety. It's a gift. Some can't risk believing it, though; knowing what death is; knowing the empty pain after someone precious is ripped from our life. How could we risk hoping for anything again when we fought to hope but in vain? The Easter Gospel tells us that because of Jesus, we *can* risk such hope.

I find it strange that the perspective that isn't often represented in the Gospel stories of the resurrection is this simple, immediate belief that Jesus had risen as he said he would. No-one in today's Gospel twigs to it at first – unless the disciple whom Jesus loved did – the one who reached the tomb first and saw and 'believed'. But we're not told what he believed.

So he and Peter have gone home, and Magdalene's still at the tomb, alone again. But everything changes. Mary – My teacher – *Stop holding on to me.*

It began very ***early – so early that it was still dark.*** But for Mary Magdalene, the shadows parted at this moment. The agony was over! He tells her to stop holding on to him and to go and tell the others he was going to ascend to his Father and our Father, his God and ours. She's the first apostle, and her message is astonishing *Tell them I'm taking mortal life into the fullness of risen life with my God and your God; I'm connecting all of you directly and for ever with the source of your being!*

It's a message for us. *My God and your God* ... means we're directly connected with Jesus. And maybe shockingly that means we're not going to be saved from dying – he wasn't. But it does mean we can be set free from the hopelessness that imagines everything stops at death. It means we and our loved ones are freed like him to rise; to be, even now, God's agents of new life and growth and nourishment for the nations; for the whole Earth that he came to live and die for.

Over the centuries, we whom Jesus has called by name have found this hope in ourselves – in our own callings – come to be convinced of it; so convinced we've faced their own deaths in his name; not as fanatics who take our own lives and the lives of others for reasons of their own, but as women and children and men so free that we can give our own lives in the service of others so they might live in his hope, his joy, his love.

Easter is the time we celebrate this gift to the world; the resurrected, ascended life that God always holds out to the Earth community. To find it, we have to be ready, like Jesus was, to let go of it. But that's alright; you can see what became of death in his hands. That's what he intends for us; for us, his loved ones and for ours; for the whole world. ... Easter means this: God loves us to life. And nothing, not even death, can stand in the way! Amen.