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Easter Sunday 2018

John 20:1-18

'Woman, why are you weeping, for whom are you looking'

Words of Jesus to Mary

Our gospel this morning begins at a great pace with a lot of movement and activity. First Mary comes to the tomb and sees the stone has been removed, then she runs to get Peter and another disciple who also run what is evidently a race to get to the tomb. The other disciple outstrips Peter and gets there first. They see the empty tomb and we are told they 'believe', which presumably means they believe that Jesus has risen from the dead, but we aren't given any details in this great rushing scene. The disciples then go home.

Suddenly the action slows to a stop. Mary doesn't go home. She stands on her own by the tomb crying. This does not look like good news to her. Jesus' body is not there and she doesn't know where it has been taken. When the angels ask her why she is weeping, Mary, after all that she's been through, seems to be beyond the point of surprise at seeing an angel and just answers the question; 'they have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him'. Then she sees Jesus, and recognises him **when he says her name**. Mary recognises when she is recognised. No one said her name like Jesus said it.

To put it in modern terms, this is Mary's moment of conversion. She does not believe the truth of the resurrection until she sees Jesus, and so we see Mary here at the moment that she becomes a Christian. She wants to stay in that moment of glory, being bathed in the love of her savior, but Jesus tells her that the Christian life is not like that. She is called to go out into the world and begin her Christian ministry as the first witness to the resurrection. The first thing she must do is pass the message of the good news to the disciples.

There is a new film out about Mary Magdalene, you may have seen it, telling a version of the Holy Week and Easter story from Mary's point of view. It seems to me that the writers have taken this scene in John and worked backwards from it to create a picture of what Mary might have been like. Of course, much of the film is by definition made up. We simply don't have enough information about Mary Magdalene to fill two hours, but the presentation of her role amongst the disciples in the film is fascinating. She is depicted as a disciple in her own right with a particular ministry to women. She baptises, she teaches, and she also had a ministry to the other disciples, the apostle to the apostles as she is later called. Where they tend to rush to answers, Mary is prepared to stay with the uncertainty of what it means to follow Jesus.

We cannot know of course how accurate this is, but it is a helpful story, helping the audience to see Mary Magdalene as a whole person who loved Jesus, just as much as Simon Peter and the other disciples, a woman whose life was transformed by Jesus and made a decision to follow him to the end. The theory



that she may have had a ministry to women is a fascinating one. I was a child in the 1980s. I remember from being quite young, perhaps aged 7 or 8 thinking that if it weren't for the fact that I was a girl, when I grew up, I would like to be a vicar. I simply couldn't imagine that a girl could grow up to lead a church because I had never seen it. If Mary did minister alongside the male disciples, if she baptised, if she taught, that would have had a profound effect on the way in which the women and girls who heard Jesus would have seen themselves, and their own capacity to teach and lead.

Whatever role Mary had in Jesus' ministry, we do know that his effect on her life was transformative. After the resurrection she became the first Christian evangelist, going to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord. And her role, as first carrier of the Christian gospel was vital to the post resurrection the story of the people of God.

And from Mary's experience in the garden, one of the hallmarks of Easter celebrations has been surprise. Mary's surprise, recognising Jesus when he said her name, the astonishing truth of the resurrection is mirrored in the surprise of the Easter egg hunt, the glint of shiny paper peeping out from half hidden places.

My favourite Easter surprise happened a few years ago when I was working in a very multicultural parish in Newcastle Upon Tyne. Like many parish priests, I had woken up on Easter morning not experiencing the joy of the resurrection, but experiencing anxiety over whether I had bought enough Easter eggs for the children's hunt. So off I went to the little Tesco at the top of the street to buy some more. The local Roman Catholic priest had beaten me to it, he was on the same mission, as it turned out. Father Jim had a voice a bit like Chris's, it could fill a room without a microphone. He saw me at the door and bellowed across the shop 'sister in Christ, Alleluia, Christ is risen'. I replied of course in the traditional manner 'he is risen indeed hallelujah'. whereupon the Muslim behind the counter said 'ah yes, your special day, Happy Easter', and suddenly people from all races, languages and faiths all over the shop were shaking hands and saying Happy Easter'. Father Jim started to give out the easter eggs he had just bought and the atmosphere of celebration was palpable.

The overflowing joy of Easter morning in Tesco, and the surprise of the whole shop sharing our festival will always stay with me. The resurrection story is not just for inside church walls, it overflows into our homes, our streets, and our lives 'He is risen indeed Alleluia'

And so today, as we stand beside Mary in the garden early on that Easter morning, we share that moment with her as she recognises her risen Lord when he says her name. We also reflect on Mary herself, and the role she played in the Easter story, the confidence and courage that Jesus gave her to spread the good news of the risen Lord. May it be so with us. As we, with Mary in the garden, hear the news of the risen Jesus, may we know the truth of the resurrection in our own lives, the power of God's love which transcends gender, colour, and all that divides us, so that we may know the message of Easter, that hope always conquers despair, faith conquers fear, and life conquers the power of death.

Amen