

April 24, 2011 / Easter Sunday / David L. Edwards

## **The Resurrection of Hope**

John 20:1-18      *Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

The first thing to say about John's story of the resurrection is that the main character is a woman! In the other gospels, as well, women are equally present with, if not more prominent than, the men. They are the first to arrive at the tomb. The women bring spices to anoint Jesus' body, an intimate act of ongoing love, honor, and devotion. In those days a woman could not be considered a witness to anything. Only male testimony counted. If men didn't see it, it didn't happen! Yet, all four gospels are clear that women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Within a male dominated society and religion, Jesus and the gospel writers affirmed the central place of women. Women were undeniably among the disciples and friends of Jesus.

This is very important to hear on this Easter Sunday 2011, and I think it is part of the Easter good news. We tend to think that the decades of efforts toward the equality of women have brought permanent and widespread change. To an extent, that is true. However, in religion and culture there continues to be a drift back toward male domination and the exclusion of the female. The approach to life based on domination has been and continues to be disastrous for human life and the earth itself. In John's resurrection story, Mary Magdalene is front and center. That is something that needs to be pondered deeply and celebrated. It is radically life affirming.

Thomas Berry writes that in order for the earth and humans to survive the destruction we have brought, and continue to bring, on the earth, we need four wisdoms: the wisdom of indigenous people, the wisdom of science, the wisdom of the classical traditions of East and West, and the wisdom of women. Kaye and I were discussing this and agreed that there must be a fifth wisdom--the wisdom of children. "The wisdom of women," Berry writes, "is to join the knowing of the body to that of mind, to join soul to spirit, intuition to reasoning, feeling consciousness to intellectual analysis, intimacy to detachment, subjective presence to objective distance. When these functions become

separated in carrying out the human project then the way into the future is to bring them together." (The Great Work, p. 180) Mary's presence in this story and her responses are crucial for us as we reflect on what it means to be human beings and persons of faith. We are created male and female, and both together are the reflection and expression of the divine.

Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty and goes to tell Peter and another disciple, presumed to be the author of the gospel. They come running, look in the tomb, and go back home. The main story belongs to Mary. She remains in the burial garden, alone with her bewilderment and grief. This is a story of Mary's journey into and through despair. Her love for Jesus is deep and personal. It includes her love for all that he taught and represented--the vision of life as it is truly created and meant to be. His death was the loss of all of that. Her grief is emotional, but it is also felt in her body and soul.

This is very important because we lose hope and struggle with despair about life. There are so many overwhelming things facing us--the destruction of the creation itself, widespread and growing poverty, the addiction to violence and war, the greed and power that consumes us and brings about the suffering of people and the earth. There are also the personal struggles we have, the loss of health or the fracturing of relationships, our bouts of worry and anxiousness, or simply the feelings of malaise that sometimes sweep over us. Religion seems to be mostly concerned with self-maintenance and self-promotion. It has also become destructive, fostering and engaging in physical and spiritual violence. All of these things speak of our failure as a human family to understand what life is about, to live in harmony with each other and the world that is our home and nourishes us in every way.

Jesus' teachings and his life were centered in the vision of God's reign over all of life, the kingdom of God. Jesus fully embodied what it means to live as a human being devoted to God's dream for the earth. His suffering and crucifixion were the result of his uncompromising devotion to the vision of God's kingdom. Killing him was the fear-filled response of those attached to the illusions and delusions of power and violence and self-serving. In Mary's grief we recognize our own sorrow for ourselves and the world, and our deep longing for life. For all Mary knows, Jesus has not only been killed but his body and grave site desecrated. The dream has not only died but also been trampled on.

Mary looks into the tomb and sees two angels, though she doesn't recognize them as divine messengers. Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put his body. She doesn't know who "they" are and she doesn't even have Jesus' corpse as an object of her devotion and love.

Now there is a voice behind her. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She turns to see a fellow she assumes to be the gardener. Maybe he knows something. "Sir, if you have moved his body, just tell me where, and I will take him away." Jesus now calls her name: "Mary!" And Mary suddenly springs to life as she recognizes Jesus. "Rabbi! Teacher!" What was dead in Mary is suddenly alive. Her love, her devotion, her giving of herself to all that Jesus was and represented, it all springs back to life. There is in Mary a resurrection of hope.

The gospel writers skillfully avoid giving us a photograph of the resurrected Jesus. They all protect the utter mystery of the resurrection. Mary doesn't recognize the resurrected Jesus; she takes him to be the gardener. Only when he speaks her name does she know him. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus spoke of himself as the good shepherd who calls each sheep by name (John 10). Now he speaks the name of one of his sheep, and she knows his voice. The risen Christ is not something to be proven. He is experienced as he calls us by name, as he reawakens us to our relationship with him, a relationship of devotion and commitment to following him, to living the way of God's dream for life. So Easter is not about our heads. It is not about a doctrine of the resurrection that must be figured out intellectually or defended. It is about our hearts and our whole lives being called to wake up from the dreadful illusions that dominate the human family, and to awaken to the reality of God's vision of life.

Mary must have made a move toward Jesus, to throw her arms around him in joy. He quickly says, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go and tell the others that I am ascending to God." The life of faith is not about holding onto Jesus, clinging to Jesus as a personal possession or some kind of security blanket in a scary world. In other places the gospels show us Jesus discouraging this kind of holding on to him. Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I ask? (Luke 6:46) Peter wants to build booths up on the mountain to make permanent the moment of Jesus' transfiguration, to hold onto that experience. But a voice from the enveloping

cloud tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. Listening in this sense always means doing what one hears, living it in one's life.

The wisest spiritual teachers and leaders always discourage their disciples from holding onto them, from becoming attached to them. Instead, they point their disciples to their own lives, call them to embody in their own living the truths they are learning. It is not about holding onto Jesus. It is about following him, making the commitment to live out in one's own life the vision of God's kingdom that Jesus himself embodied, lived and died for. Do not hold on to me. I am going on, continuing the journey of what God has given me to do. Come, follow me.

The story continues, of course, as a community of the risen Christ gathers and gives its life to what he gave his life to—the reign of God over all of life, beginning with our own lives. This morning, as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, Mary's grief is part of it. It is our grief, too. And if we are not grieving for the death of what is good and true and life-giving in our world today, then we need to look at ourselves. That kind of grief is an important part of the life of faith. But it does not stop there. It is not about being stuck in our grief. The resurrection story is also about moving through grief as we hear the living Christ speak our names, calling us back to ourselves and our lives in relation to God, to the sacred dimension of life. This becomes the resurrection of hope, that the world can be what God made it to be, that the human family, beginning with us, can live the life of God's kingdom. This is what Jesus gave his life to and what he fully and completely lived out. It is the life to which he calls us each by name, not to hold onto him but to follow him in life of the kingdom of God. It is also the life we share in community, each of us discerning what piece of that kingdom is ours to nurture and tend, what each of us is called to express and be faithful to, with the gifts God has given us. And together, as a community of the risen Christ, through the commitments we make to lives of prayer and service, the inward and outward dimensions of our lives, we sustain and nourish the vision of life as it is meant to be. God is always about to do a new thing, creating new heavens and a new earth, leading us from death to life, and calling us in the life and spirit of Jesus to be part of it.