

April 20, 2014 / Easter Sunday / David L. Edwards

## Jesus' Resurrection and Ours

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 fact, in all four gospels, women are the first to arrive at Jesus' tomb. They bring spices to anoint Jesus' body, an intimate act of ongoing love, honor, and devotion. In the Judaism of that day, 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 agree--women were the first witnesses to 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 closest disciples and friends of Jesus.

This is part of the Easter good news on this Easter Sunday 2014. Decades of efforts toward the equality of women have brought permanent and widespread change. However, in religion and culture there always exists a tendency to drift back toward male domination and the diminishing of the female. Life patterns based on domination and hierarchy have been and continue to be destructive for human life and the earth itself. In John's resurrection story, Mary Magdalene is front and center, something to be celebrated and deeply contemplated.

Thomas Berry—priest, theologian, scientist, and ecologist--wrote that in order for the earth and humans to survive the destruction we continue to bring to 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. We must add, however, a fifth wisdom--the wisdom of children, which was central to the teachings of Jesus and which we have yet to take seriously as a culture and a religion. "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 can help us 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, the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27).

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 central role in the story belongs to Mary. She remains in the burial garden, alone with her shock 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 created and meant to be. For Mary, Jesus' death was the loss of all of that, and her grief is felt in body and soul.

This is very important because we lose hope and struggle with discouragement, even despair about life. There are so many overwhelming things facing us--the destruction of the creation, widespread and growing poverty, the addiction to violence and war, the greed and power that consume us and perpetuate the suffering of people and the earth. There are also the personal struggles we have, heavy responsibilities we carry, the loss of health, the fracturing of relationships, bouts of worry and anxiousness, or simply the feelings of malaise that sometimes sweep over us. Religion is too often concerned with institutional maintenance and promotion rather than with the feeding of people's spirits. 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 with the world that is our home.

Jesus' teachings and life were centered in the vision of God's presence in and reign over all of life, what he called the kingdom of God. Jesus embodied, or incarnated, 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, defensive response of those attached to the illusions and delusions of power and violence and self-serving. In Mary's grief we may 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 desecrated. The dream has not only died but also been trampled.

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." Then 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 and life.

The gospel writers do not try to give us a “photograph” of the resurrected Jesus. They protect the utter mystery of the resurrection. Mary does not 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 Jesus is not something to be proven. He is experienced as he calls us by name, as he reawakens us to our relationship with him, our devotion and commitment to following him in living the way of God’s dream for life. Easter is not about our heads. It is not about a doctrine of the resurrection to be figured out, proven, or defended. It is about our hearts and our whole lives being called to wake up from the deadening illusions that dominate the human family, and to awaken to the reality of God’s vision of life and our own true 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. Go tell the others that I am ascending to God.” The life of faith is not about holding onto Jesus, clinging to Jesus as a possession or a kind of security blanket. In other places, as well, the gospels show us Jesus discouraging this kind of holding on to him. On one occasion, he asked someone who addressed him as Lord, “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 (Mark 9:5). 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, but following him, making the commitment to live out in one’s own life the vision of God’s kingdom that Jesus 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. Do the same in the precious and unique life God has given you.

The story continues, as a community of the risen Jesus gathers and gives its life also to the vision of God's presence and reign over all of life. This morning, as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, Mary's grief is part of it. It is our grief, too. 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. I don't mean complaining about the world. I don't mean saying how awful things are. I mean compassionate grief, the kind of grief that comes from sharing God's own love for the world. This grief is part of the life of faith. However, 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 Jesus speak our names, calling us back to our true selves, and our lives in relation to God, to the sacred dimension of life. This is 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 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 presence and realm of God.

This is 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 Jesus, 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. And it begins when we hear our names called, restoring us to life that really is life. The story of Mary and Jesus' resurrection is about our resurrection, as well. This Easter morning, and every morning, is the morning of our new life.