

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

April 12, 2020

"Rabbouni"

Two days after seeing her friend and teacher cruelly executed, Mary comes to the tomb in the morning darkness. She can't enter the tomb because of the stone, and in any case the body will be decaying. Does she come to mourn her friend's death, to mourn what might have been? Does she come to process all that has happened, including the revelation that Jesus was the son of God?

The Gospel According to John repeatedly tells us that Jesus' crucifixion is also his glorification. In Chapter 3 Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Moses lifted up a bronze serpent, and those who saw it were cured of snakebite. Similarly, God works out the people's salvation through Jesus' crucifixion as he is lifted up on the cross.

In Chapter 12, Jesus says, 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say —"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name....when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.'

But as our passage opens, it seems that God's saving work is not yet complete. It may be that the goodness of God was revealed; it may be that Jesus' followers saw that God was not ashamed to be present among them in human form, even to suffer in solidarity with their suffering and to die on the cross as humans die. It may be that in this revelation Jesus was glorified. But our salvation is not yet accomplished. Mary does not come to the tomb rejoicing. She sees that the stone is rolled away, and jumps to the conclusion that this is some further indignity, some further plot to deny Jesus' legacy and his teachings.

She runs to tell her fellow disciples, Peter and the Beloved Disciple. They run to the tomb to see for themselves. They see the empty tomb; they see the abandoned wrappings.

In other Gospel accounts, this is where the scene ends. Angels announce "He is not here; he has been raised" and the disciples go away rejoicing and proclaiming what God has done.

Not here. The Beloved Disciple believes, but we are not told what it is that he believes. Clearly it's not enough, because the two disciples return to their homes in silence instead of jubilant proclamation. Perhaps they were still numb from seeing their friend and teacher cruelly executed. Perhaps that's why they could not see with the eyes of faith.

But something *has* happened. This is a night unlike all other nights; this is a day unlike all other days. We celebrate the unique and saving acts of God. We celebrate the time everything changed; the time God forged a nation out of Egyptian slaves, and the time the presence of God was definitively revealed in a human being, Jesus.

I saw a cartoon with two Jewish grandparents sitting with a Seder plate. They ask the traditional question, “How is this night different from all other nights?” All the other chairs at the table are empty; In the background is their extended family on the computer screen, present via Zoom.

It is a Passover unlike all other Passovers and an Easter unlike all other Easters. Unlike other Easters, we cannot gather with our family and those who are as close as family. We cannot share a meal and share our love with those beside us, because they cannot be beside us.

Like those first disciples of all genders, we are traumatized also by our new situation. If you tire easily, if your children are angry or stubborn or silent or too full of energy, if you lack your usual patience or clarity of thought, psychologists are saying that it’s because you or your kids are traumatized by the lack of routine, by the lack of security, by the lack of predictability, by the lack of connection, by the lack of certainty about the future.

You may even feel like the Good News of Easter is still trapped behind that stone. You may even feel that that Jesus' glorification as the son of God, as the risen and transcendent one, is not what you need right now.

Jesus' resurrection and glorification wasn't enough for John, either, and so in his version the scene continues. As the other disciples leave, Mary remains, weeping. She bends down to look inside the tomb and suddenly it is not empty! Two angels are there. But unlike in the Gospel accounts, they aren't much help. "Why are you weeping?" They ask. "They have taken away my Lord," she responds, "and I do not know where they have laid him." Mary still doesn't understand what has happened. Then she turns around and sees Jesus himself, but it still isn't enough. She doesn't recognize him; she is still convinced that the body has simply been stolen. She still doesn't understand.

Until he calls her by name. "Mary."

"Rabbouni!" she replies.

She tries to hug him, but he tells her not to. Instead, he says, "Go go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Whereas previously it was dark, now it is fully morning. Whereas previously there was grief and terror and confusion, now there is joy. Whereas previously the disciples were silent, now Mary recognizes Jesus, recognizes Good News, and proclaims it to the other disciples.

Why?

What has changed?

It all seems to hinge on those two words.

“Mary.” “Rabbouni!”

She is not “woman,” but “Mary,” the name he used to call her. And he is not some stranger, nor even a teacher of wisdom. He is not "Rabbi" - "Teacher" - but "Rabbouni": “*My teacher.*” *Relationship* is the key to understanding the full extent of the Good News. In the introductory verses of John’s Gospel, we are told, “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” The point of the Gospel, the heart of the Good News, is therefore not simply that Jesus was the son of God, but that we are *all* children of God. Jesus says, “tell *my brothers* that I am ascending to my Father *and your Father*, to my God *and your God.*”

The heart of John’s Gospel is not simply Jesus’ resurrection, but his resurrection *and ascension*. It means we are now children of God; it means Jesus' resurrection becomes our resurrection, not just a new life that can die again due to age or illness or misadventure, but a new life in God and a new relationship to the world and to the divine nature which is above and in underneath it all. It means that although we are isolated from loved ones, the spring occurring all around is now *our* spring. The rebirth of the natural world is now our rebirth. It means that resurrection is now the pattern of

the world and not just of one man. It means we do not look forward only to a resurrection at the end of time but also to a union now with the source of death and resurrection, breathing with the rhythm of the world, of the seasons, which is God.

It means that you in your house and me in my apartment are united with all that is, breathing with the same breath, beating with the same heart. Nothing can take that away from us, distance cannot separate us, death cannot end us: He is Risen.

Grace and peace to you.

Amen.

**Sources:**

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