

In this Easter season, our sermons will be working through the gospel of John and looking at all the resurrection stories that there are in that gospel, and I'm pleased that we have the opportunity to look at them in detail, especially in this time of pandemic when we need to hear the resurrection stories and the hope they contain now, perhaps more than ever. And I have to say that in looking at the resurrection stories at this time of crisis, they seem to me every time I turn to them to take on new and deeper meanings. The story set for today is about Mary Magdalene. And the story is driven by dialogue and I want to focus on three characters in the story and three things that they say to move the action forward. They speak words which seem to me to be very relevant to the situation in which we find ourselves.

There are three questions that we should be asking ourselves at this time. But first, a bit of context. Our passage begins with Mary Magdalene standing by the tomb of Jesus, the empty tomb of Jesus, weeping. She was the first person to discover that the tomb was empty. She'd gone there early in the morning to anoint the body with spices. She'd found the stone rolled away and she'd gone back to tell the disciples what she found, and Peter and John heard her, and then rushed to the tomb themselves, looked in, and then rushed off again. The previous paragraph to this ends with these words: "then the disciples returned to their homes."

They left Mary in her grief by the tomb. And at this point in the story, Mary is still in Good Friday mode. She'd watched Jesus be crucified on the cross and then for her at this time, she's worried the situation's got even worse. That now Jesus' body, she thinks might have been stolen. So when the angel says to her, "Why

are you weeping?" She could have answered in many different ways. She had lots of reasons to be crying and it wasn't just the angels that ask her these questions. Jesus himself says to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

It's a question that honors the pain and the sorrow that Mary was feeling. And Mary has this encounter with the risen Jesus because unlike Peter and John, she doesn't rush off. She stays in the place where the pain is. She stands and weeps giving the grief, desolation and agony of her circumstance, their due. Our resurrection hope is rooted in the pain of Good Friday. Resurrection hope doesn't deny the existence of pain and suffering, rather it takes it full on and transforms it into something else.

Why are you weeping? That's a pertinent question that all of us can ask ourselves this Easter. Are we weeping because we are fearful? Are we weeping because we're worried about the pandemic that's going on around us? Are we weeping because we think it will get worse? We're not sure how things are going to work out. Are we weeping because we're lonely or because we've lost somebody close to us? Why are we weeping? To ask this question in this season, it's not faithless, it's a place to route our resurrection experience. We can ask that question because our resurrection hope offers us the promise of renewal and transformation, that the pain which makes us weak today will not be the final word.

The second bit of dialogue that I want to highlight is odd and rather awkward. Mary meets the risen Jesus, but thinks at first it's the gardener. Then Jesus calls her name and she recognizes him. She turns, she says, "Teacher", and presumably moved towards him because Jesus says, "Do not hold onto me. Do not touch me." In today's parlance, he asks Mary to

practice social distancing. You know, I'm English, as social distancing comes naturally to me. Whenever somebody comes towards me and I think they're going to offer me a hug, a chill goes down my spine. But even I think that what Jesus says here is challenging. It sounds a bit gruff. Don't hold onto me. Why does he say that?

Wouldn't it be the most natural thing if for Mary to cling on to a loved one who had unexpectedly returned? Well, yes, but that's not the situation here. It's not that Jesus has come back early from a trip. He's been resurrected. He who was dead, has been raised to new life. Jesus and Mary weren't going to pick up where they left off. Things were fundamentally different. Jesus is cautioning Mary against possessiveness and an unwillingness to let things change. To recognize the situation was different.

Perhaps Jesus could discern that Mary was seeking to hold onto what she feared she would lose, but she had to let go of former ways and grow and become an apostle to the apostles, the key witness to the resurrection. Jesus is inviting Mary to loosen her grip on the past, to stop expecting life to be what it was before the cross and the grave, to lead into the new hope of resurrection life, to experience the transformation that resurrection brings. The current pandemic has brought lots of things into sharp relief. Life has in many ways been simplified, and lots of things that seemed important once seem less important now. Rather than rush to returning to the old normal, why don't we step back and think about what our new normal might look like whenever that time comes? What do we want to hold onto? What do we want to let go of?

The final piece of dialogue I want to mention comes at the end of our passage and it's from Mary as she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." The story that starts with tears ends with a proclamation of good and joyous news. She tells of her experience, what she has seen and what she has heard, and we know from the other gospels that the disciples don't believe Mary straight away, but she doesn't let their doubts and incomprehension and cynicism stop her. She tells them because she knows they need to hear it, so she shares her experience boldly, bravely, and joyfully. And how the world needs to hear now about the joyful message of resurrection, what Peter called in his epistle that we heard, "the new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Where are we seeing the Lord at this time? I know for me, it's in my Bible reading. Whenever I turn to the scriptures, I'm finding a new depth and meaning to what I'm reading there in this context. It's often in times of crisis that God seems most real, most close by. Is that our experience? I know that many people are keeping a COVID diary, which is a great idea, and we could record that, reflect on our times of prayer or when in the course of a day, God is close by, where we are meeting Him, where we are seeing Him. So that when this time is over, we with Mary can proclaim that we too have seen the Lord. So may we like Mary, be moved from weeping to joy. The woman who stayed with the pain, weeping at the empty tomb, was transformed by the living hope of the resurrection to a woman joyfully proclaiming to the disciples that she had seen the Lord. God grant us the grace to share something of Mary's transformation. Amen.