

## **Easter, 2022 - Seeking God's Way: Learning from Mary to move from Certainty to Openness**

**A sermon preached at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

That Easter morn, at break of day,  
a faithful woman went her way  
to seek the tomb where Jesus lay.  
Alleluia!

This opening stanza to our easter hymn beautifully sets the scene for us, this morning, doesn't it? Although, perhaps *beautiful* is not the best word to describe the setting as Mary would have initially experienced it as she journeyed to the tomb of her teacher, Jesus, to care for his lifeless body. In fact, if anything she would likely have been filled with grief. Mary, and all the other disciples who had followed Jesus on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, had now faced the trauma and shock of seeing him executed by the empire. They had become his closest friends. They were certain that he was the one they had been waiting for. They were certain that he was their expected king, the Messiah. But then Pilate had made of those words a mockery, "King of the Jews," he had written above Jesus' head on the cross, making it clear what Rome would do to all who thought to challenge the emperor.

That's it. It's over. What good is "seeking God's way" if it leads to this? None of us could fault Mary or the disciples for thinking something like this. Even if they had seen amazing works of wonder and power throughout Jesus' ministry, the shock of his death would have made it hard to be open to the possibility that God would do something new in the face of this loss. One foot in front of the other, Mary walked. The least she could do was faithfully honour Jesus in death as she had honored him in life. As strange as it is to say this on this easter morning of resurrection joy, we are also called to pay attention to Mary's grief and her faithful service to Jesus in his life and in his death. Her journey to the tomb to care for Jesus' body on easter

morning is our example: we too must grieve our losses together and honour those beloved among us who have passed; we must walk with each other in life and in death, remaining faithful to each other, even when we feel so deeply our loss.

When Mary's heart was filled with gloom  
and she stood weeping near the tomb,  
a stranger spoke,  
she knew not whom. Alleluia!

These words from the second stanza of our easter hymn introduces us to a new, surprising character in the easter morning story. Like the many encounters with the risen Jesus that are yet to come in the Gospel accounts, Mary's initial encounter with the risen Jesus in the garden is an encounter with a stranger. Certain that he was gone, that Rome had sealed his fate, her eyes were not yet open to a different possibility. "Might this stranger have taken Jesus?," she thought? Mary's attention was captured by the thought of Jesus' missing body, not Jesus present, alive, newly embodied in the face of another.

"Why do you weep?" his question came.  
"Whose is the body you would claim?"  
And then, at last,  
he spoke her name. Alleluia!

While Mary was visually distracted by Jesus' absence, her faithfulness to Jesus had prepared her to hear *his voice*...his voice even as it was spoken through a stranger. "Mary." The Gospel of John says that when Jesus spoke her name she *turned towards him* and then addressed him as "Teacher" (*Rabbouni*). But, it wasn't the physical turning of Mary's body—it wasn't seeing the physical appearance of the risen Jesus—that allowed her to recognize him. It was her openness to his voice. That Mary was able to recognize Jesus by his voice tells us that long ago she had turned towards and opened her heart to Jesus as his dedicated disciple; she had turned

towards him as she followed him along the dusty roads leading through cities and villages; she had opened her heart towards him while he taught. It was Mary's devoted, intentional openness towards Jesus *before*, that had prepared her to recognize Jesus' voice in the garden *then*. Mary's devotion and openness to Jesus in his life, in his death, and through his death to his risen life, is our example: our dedication to and love for Jesus must be great enough to open us up to encounter him in the stranger.

The drama of what unfolds next is not surprising: Mary wants to touch Jesus, to hold on to him. Maybe she wanted to be certain that Jesus was not a ghost, but more likely she just wanted to show affection and care to Jesus. Her dear friend, her teacher, her Lord who was so violently wrenched away in death, is within her grasp! This person, *whose touch* had healed her, she could now touch again. It was only natural to want to embrace Jesus. Perhaps she could even hold him there, to be certain that he would not leave her again. But Jesus re-directs Mary's affection with an imperative command: "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" What gives, Jesus? You're alive! This is wonderful! Why, when Mary has turned towards you in love and joy at having you back do you so quickly ask her to turn back towards the other disciples?

Devoted readers of scripture down through the ages have often puzzled at this verse, especially given that not long after this encounter with Mary, Jesus will invite a different disciple, Thomas, to place his finger in his side—to touch him. So why "Do not touch me" in this moment and "Place your finger in my side" in the other moment? St. Augustine mused that the risen Rabbi was again teaching his disciples an important lesson, this time about the meaning, depth, and purpose of resurrection life. When Jesus later asked Thomas to put his finger in his

side, it was to teach Thomas that the same Jesus he had known really was raised from the dead—he was not just a ghost or a hallucination.<sup>1</sup> Resurrection does indeed restore to life that which was lost. Jesus wanted Thomas to believe this in his heart, even if it was the certainty of an encounter with the flesh of Jesus that Thomas sought out initially.

But, then, what about Mary? When Jesus asked Mary not to touch him, it was to teach Mary that resurrection life does not simply restore things to the same state as before. In this way, Jesus' resurrection was decidedly different than the resurrection that he had performed for his friend Lazarus days earlier. Jesus' resurrection was not a simple return to the same state as before; it was not a resuscitation, rather it was new creation. Jesus wasn't raised so that Mary could now be certain that she had him back, to walk those dusty streets again in the same way as before. God had done something *new* in raising Jesus, and this newness would be the beginning of a different relationship between Jesus, his disciples, and indeed the world from then on. Jesus needed Mary and the disciples to know that resurrection life was God's life re-making creation, not just Jesus and his body. And Jesus needed Mary and the disciples to know that a key part of this re-making, this new creation, was that God was calling the disciples to be instruments of this new creation. By telling Mary not to touch him, Jesus was helping her see that he was doing what he had promised the disciples he would do: he was returning to the father, so that he could send the promised spirit of power to help them be his new-creation hands and feet in the world.

And so Jesus' imperative to Mary, "Do not to touch me," was followed with another imperative: "Go..." When Mary had first heard Jesus' voice speak her name, she turned towards him. Now, she listens to Jesus' voice as he tells her to *turn away from him*. Think about that image, for a moment. What must it have taken for Mary to turn away from Jesus? But turn she

---

<sup>1</sup> Augustine correlated Thomas' need to believe in the physical resurrection that would come in the day of the Lord and Mary's need to believe and work at the inner resurrection process that starts through faith.

did, because Jesus called her and the other disciples to redirect their touch towards the world, bringing the healing power and new creation of resurrection faith into empires held in captivity to the death dealing powers that had tried to silence Jesus and had failed. Mary somehow saw that Jesus' resurrection was a revolution and a divine act of protest against the worldly powers of death. Disciples of Jesus ever since have been challenged to not let the powers of death demoralize and stifle our imagination. Jesus has risen, so how can we let the powers of death hold us back from giving ourselves to the world just like Jesus did.

No longer weeping, anguish-bent,  
but with rejoicing Mary went,  
by Christ as first apostle sent. Alleluia!

Mary Magdalene, the first apostle—the first messenger—of the Risen Jesus. Mary's obedience to Jesus in this moment, her willingness not to hold on to Jesus—not to attempt to make Jesus her own possession—is our example. It's hard not to hold on when we are asked to “let go” in our lives, isn't it? Throughout Lent and all the way on our journey to the cross we've been asked to let go of our ways to embrace God's way, and now we hear that call echo again, this time by the risen Jesus. “You may want to have me back as before, but you must let me go. And you must go, be my hands and feet in the world.” The problem with holding on is that we won't move either. Jesus' words to Mary and Mary's obedience to those words challenge us as disciples of Jesus. Like Mary, we must be turned outward; we must let the resurrection open us towards the world.

On this most holy day of days,  
to God your hearts and voices raise  
in laud and jubilee and praise.  
Alleluia!

No commentary on this verse, just a resounding Amen! Alleluia and Amen! For Christ has risen!

And all the people said: **He has risen indeed.**