

21 April 2019

Voices of Easter

John 20:1-18

Mary: I've never had any trouble connecting with other people, only with having relationships. You see the difference, don't you? I know how to surround myself with people, how to make sure that everywhere I go there's someone else there for me to be with, a friend or a friend's sister or a friend of a friend, just so long as I'm not alone. Who I'm connected with was how I knew who I was. I never thought of myself as separate from those around me. At least not until the demons came, with the voices and the colors and the days and nights without sleep. Then suddenly I was alone.

I see now, though, that I had always been alone. Even when I was in the middle of my web of connections. You see, I had always been whatever others needed me to be – Mother's girl, Daddy's princess, Zechariah's sister, the unmarried girl, the woman from Magdala. Like most of the other women I knew, I was always defining myself by what others expected of me, but I myself, whoever that was, was never really there. I think that may be why the demons chose me. There was a vacancy.

But Jesus was different. When we met – I mean when we *really* met, after he had cast the demons out of the babbling shell that I was – all he said was, "And what is your name?" He didn't ask who my family was, or whether I was married, or where I was from. He just asked my name. "Mary." And then he didn't comment on the name, how he'd always liked that name or how he knew someone else with the same name – I didn't find out until months later that Mary was also his mother's name. He didn't ask any of that stuff. He didn't want to know *about* me. He wanted to know *me*.

As I said, he was different. Too different for most people, I guess. When you were around him, you couldn't help think that this was what all men – all *people* – were supposed to be like, and there are only two ways to respond to that: you can either try to be like him, or you can hate him. Hatred is easier, I guess. So they killed him. They crucified him, and I stood beside his mother and some new man from Jerusalem and watched the only person who had ever cared about me die.

The Beloved Disciple: I wasn't with him from the start. He was up in Galilee, and my home was in Jerusalem. While he was healing people and irritating the local Pharisees in Capernaum, I was at home reading the works of the rabbis or listening to my father in scholarly debate with his friend the high priest. Why would I care what an untrained workman from Nazareth was saying when I had the greatest minds of Israel in my living room?

But then Jesus came to Jerusalem for a week, and I happened to be at the temple gate when he healed a man who had been born blind, a man I'd been stepping over on my way to worship for so many years that I thought of him as part of the sidewalk. But Jesus stopped and talked to him. His followers were debating that old question about whether this man's blindness was the result of his parents' sins or of some pre-natal sins of his own, but Jesus ignored them. He said that this man was born so that God could be glorified. And then he healed him. I couldn't put that moment out of my mind – it wasn't the healing so much as the way that Jesus

was so much more interested in a filthy beggar than in a theological question. I'd never seen anything like it, not from my father or the rabbis or the priests.

So when he returned to Galilee, I followed. In disguise, in some clothes I borrowed from one of the servants. You see, I didn't want any of my father's friends to see me with the Nazarene. I stayed in the background and listened, trying to blend in. Jesus knew me, though. Like I said, he noticed people. He didn't give me away, but every now and then he'd catch my eye and grin affectionately. It was weird to be a nobody and feel liked.

I was with him when he went back to Jerusalem. I saw him raise Lazarus, and I was beside him when he told Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." I was with him on the Day of Preparation, before the Passover, when he had dinner with his followers. I was there when he washed everyone's feet, and I cried like a baby to feel his rough hands scrubbing my dirt away. I was in the garden when the soldiers came to arrest him. I followed them to the High Priest's house – where I had had dinner so many times. I knew the guards, of course, and was able to get myself and Peter into the courtyard, so I was there to watch my childhood heroes condemn my master to death. And I was there at the foot of the cross, no longer caring if anyone recognized me, standing beside the Magdalene and Jesus' mother, when Jesus looked down at me and said, "Take care of my mother, will you?" I couldn't speak, but I nodded.

Jesus' mother looked hesitantly at me and said, "I . . . I don't even know your name."

Most people knew my name. It was an important name in Jerusalem, a name of nobility and honor and privilege, and I realized suddenly that it was worthless. "I'm just someone that Jesus loved. That's all."

We read from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 1-18:

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her,

'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to 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." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Beloved Disciple: I was sitting with Peter, the big smelly fisherman, on the first day of the next week – and who would have ever guessed that I would choose to be with one like that instead of with my own family? But suddenly I had more in common with him than with anyone: we both mourned our master. Then the Magdalene came running in with a story about the stone being rolled back from the tomb. She was saying something about grave-robbers, but I knew that wasn't it. I don't know how; I just knew. Nothing about this Jesus had an ordinary explanation – not the story of his birth that his mother had told me just the day before, not the way he lived, not the way he died. I smiled.

Peter starting running – pretty fast for a man his size – but I passed him easily. There was the tomb: open, just like Mary had said. I stood at the door and looked in. He was gone, but the linen wrappings were lying where the body had been. So much for the grave-robber story. Grave-robbers don't unwrap their treasures before they leave. Peter got there and pushed past me. I followed and looked slowly around at the place where death was supposed to be but wasn't, and I smiled again. I didn't understand, of course. I mean, I still don't, but back then I *really* didn't. All I had to hold on to was what Jesus had said to Martha: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

So I believed. I didn't know exactly what I was believing, but that didn't seem important. I just believed.

Mary: The three of us stood in the garden for a few minutes, none of us knowing what to say. Peter looked confused, which – to be honest – was typical. But the new man, the one from Jerusalem, looked as if something had changed for him. I wanted to ask what, but I didn't even know his name. I should find out. Names matter. The two men left, but I stayed in the garden. I crept to the door of the tomb and looked in.

There were two people in white sitting on the slab where Jesus had lain, casually leaning against the wall. I didn't occur to me until later to wonder why Peter the other disciple hadn't mentioned them; at the time all I could think was how callous they looked. One of them asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Because this is my friend's tomb you're taking a long Sabbath on, that's why!" I snapped. I turned angrily away and dashed out the door, almost running into the gardener. I stumbled, but he caught me. "Careful," he said. Then he asked the same question, "Why are you crying?"

"Sir," I sobbed, "if you're the one who moved Jesus' body, could you tell me where you laid him? I just want to say goodbye. He was my friend. More than that, he was the only one who knew me and loved me just because of who I am, the only one who could look at me and not see somebody else's property, somebody else's daughter or sister or wife, but just me."

He smiled. Then he said, "Mary."

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One of the curious things about the resurrection narratives in the gospels is *how* people recognized the Risen Christ. It was never by his physical appearance. Whatever sort of body the resurrected Jesus had, it in some way transcended superficial appearances. The disciples on the Emmaus road spent all afternoon with him and only realized who he was when he broke bread with them. This anonymous disciple whom Jesus loved, who is mentioned in the Gospel of John, didn't have to see him at all to believe. He believed when he saw what was not. And Mary Magdalene? She recognized him only when he spoke her name. Everyone recognized the incarnate Christ – Jesus the teacher, wandering through Galilee – the way we normally recognize people, by appearance and voice and so on. But everyone experienced the Risen Christ uniquely.

It is Easter. Christ is risen. But not everyone perceives the Risen Christ, because none of our usual methods for perceiving reality work in this case. We're used to trusting the evidence of our senses, testing truth by reproducible experiment, but for some reason, resurrected reality behaves differently. Christ reveals himself to us uniquely in the way that we individually know deepest truth, and since, apparently, each of us draws that deepest truth from a different well, the resurrected Christ appears differently to each of us.

No, I'm not trying to weasel out of a belief in the physical, historical resurrection of Christ. I'm not saying that the resurrection is real if it's real *to you*. (Just saying those words makes me feel a little queasy.) No, it's real. It happened. Christ rose from the grave – but rose to a qualitatively different reality, one that can be recognized but not in the usual ways, physical and yet beyond physics. If anything the resurrection is *more* real than the reality of our senses. If it were not, we would just be playing games here, amusing ourselves with vacuous spirituality and smug good works.

But because it is real, that changes everything. Christ opened a door from this reality to a new kind of physical reality, and now he is calling to each of us to join him, speaking in the voice that we each hear best.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.