

A MORE PROFOUND ALLELUIA

JOHN 20:1-18

Marielle sat at the grave tracing the letters chiseled in stone before her. A strange way to spend Easter, she knows. She is supposed to be at church where trumpets blast and choirs sing, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” She knows in her bones that Christ is risen, and yet Christ being raised does not change the fact that her mother is here.

Marielle is hungry. She is thirsty. She is searching for more than the food and drink that fills the wicker basket that she brought with her, the one that her mother wove together delicately and intricately hour after hour until it became something that would help her to hold more than she could without an extra set of hands.

Oh the lessons her mother taught her: how to cook, how to weave. She remembers the lessons more vividly than she does her mother. She is grateful for the stories that her grandmother told her. She should visit her grandmother, Marielle thinks. Her grandmother probably does not know that her mother thinks about her every day.

Mary Magdalene stands where Marielle sits, on the edge of a grave. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,” the Gospel of John reports, “Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.” Every time that I read that phrase “early on the first day of the week,” I give thanks that I do not serve a congregation that has an Easter sunrise service (it is all that we can do to have breakfast at 9:30 a.m.), and that is fine. What do any of us have to prove?

Mary Magdalene arrives “while it is still dark,” when it still feels like Maundy Thursday or, even darker, like Good Friday. The light that shines in the darkness is more pronounced than the light that shines in the light. Remember that the next time that feel like you are in deep darkness. On you, light shines.

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Easter/Resurrection of the Lord, Year B, April 12, 2009*

While it is still dark, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. While it is still dark, Mary Magdalene finds that the stone has been removed from the tomb. While it is still dark, the Easter celebration in John's Gospel begins. Mary Magdalene runs to Simon Peter, who is disturbed by the echo of the cock that crowed.

John says that there is another disciple, a lovable one who seems too insignificant to name. With each sentence, John offers more and more Gospel. The light shines brighter and brighter, dimming the faces of those enraptured by God's glory.

Peter and this other disciple run toward the tomb, and in case you forgot about Peter's betrayal, John points out that Peter comes in second place. There, in the tomb, are linen wrappings and the cloth that had crowned Jesus' brow. Peter, even though he is the second to arrive (and third if we remember Mary was there while it was still dark), is the first to step inside. What does this suggest about the relationship between faith and guilt and resurrection? Does Peter step in looking for evidence to assuage his guilt? Or is he afraid of the truth that lurks within? What is it about an empty tomb that causes him to run? What is it about an empty tomb that brings Mary to tears? For whom does Mary weep: Jesus, the disciples or herself?

John, who is usually quick to make a bold pronouncement, is strangely silent on such questions. John's speechlessness suggests that resurrection speaks for itself and that, as religious writer Frederick Buechner says, it is incumbent on the one whom proclaims the Gospel to step out of the way. Or as John suggests earlier in this Gospel, as God increases, he must decrease. Maybe the possibility of being swallowed up in this mystery horrifies Simon Peter and this nameless, faceless disciple. And so they run.

Meanwhile, Mary stands by weeping. She steps into the opening of the tomb, bends down to find angels looking back at her. Behold! Angels sit where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at his

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head and one at his feet. Apparently, they were with him as he was being crucified and attended to him in death. Comfort ye, God's people...

The angels speak at the same time: "Mary, why are you weeping?" Mary teases language out of strong emotions, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." They? "They" is potentially dangerous language. It assumes an "us" and a "them," an "in" group and an "out" group. Is Mary suggesting that Jesus' body has been stolen and a group that she despises (and thus we should all despise) is responsible for the crime? Nothing about resurrection is exclusive or criminal, unless, of course, you are death, because in this instance, if you are death, you have lost your sting.

A stranger approaches Mary. She does not know if he is an "us" or a "them." And, of course, he is both. He is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, who is the poor...the widowed...the orphaned; the one who is sick, imprisoned and hungry; the one who asks questions that call us to everything that we are as reflections of our wondrous Creator. Jesus asks Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Are you looking for me or are you looking to blame somebody for my physical absence? Whether Christ's followers would be without him spiritually is not in doubt, unless they did not trust Jesus when he promises that the Spirit would be with them always.

Sometimes it is difficult to trust God's promises, even on Easter. Mary looks beyond Christ on Easter morning when he is standing there beside her. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Of course, this man has carried him away. He is Jesus, and he will not be taken away by anyone but God.

Then, with one Word, one spoken word, the mystery is revealed. "Mary," Jesus says, and at last she finds the language to express herself. "Rabbi," she exclaims. She recognizes him because of what he taught and how he taught. Mary's instinct is to hold on to him, to cling to what she feared she had

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lost, but Jesus calls her (as he calls us) to risk being embarrassed, to put herself out there to be ridiculed publicly. Such is the nature of faith (or at least Christianity).

Jesus says, “Go!” Go to my brothers (and sisters?) and say to them, “I (Jesus) am ascending...to my God and your God.” And what are the first words that she is able to speak after this life-giving and life-changing---this resurrection---experience? “I have seen the Lord.” Five words, one Gospel: we are witnesses to the resurrection.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. We are witnesses to the resurrection. Even in darkness, we bear witness to the resurrection. Alleluia! Christ is risen. About such matters, we do not speak during Lent. At the beginning of Lent, the church buries the “Alleluia,” and yet on Easter, we say it and sing it everywhere we go.

A book that continues to help me to think about worship is *A More Profound Alleluia*. This is an anthology edited by Leanne Van Dyk, who now serves as Dean at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and the book does two things incredibly well: (1) it calls us to think theologically about everything that we do in worship (and the extent to which it does or does not reflect the love of God in Jesus Christ); and (2) it emphasizes the extent to which worship is something that we do together. It is not for specialists but for everybody whom the Lord calls. It is about bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because we, like Mary, recognize him.

Marielle knows that she would not recognize her mother, because it has been so many years since they were together, but she feels her presence as she sits by her grave. She looks around the cemetery to be sure that no one is watching. Then she sets a cloth and unpacks the basket. Her baked spaghetti is not as good as her mom’s, but it tastes more like hers than anybody else’s. She un-wraps the bread, which is still warm, and then pours a half-glass of wine. She is choosing to savor the experience, because all experience is fleeting.

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Suddenly, she hears the squeak of an un-oiled walker wheel. Her grandmother has come to visit her daughter. Now three generations gather at the tomb. Marielle's grandmother asks, "What are you doing here?" Marielle responds, "Me? What are you doing here?" And her grandmother explains, "I come here every Easter." Marielle says, "No, you don't," and her grandmother says, "Yes, I do. This is the first time that I have come at noon. I usually come early in the morning while it is still dark." Marielle's grandmother parks her walker at the edge of the cloth and says, "Give me some of that spaghetti, and I'll have a full glass of wine."

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Alleluia! Amen.

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