

(John 20:1-18 NRSV)

¹ 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. ² So 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." ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and 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. ¹³ They 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." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Close to the Heart of Transcendence

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Marsilio Ficino, the fifteenth century Italian physician and philosopher says, “The religious impulse is as natural to humans as neighing is to horses and barking to dogs.”¹ Such is the foundation for spirituality and faith. Such is what draws us here on Sunday mornings and to our knees, sometimes in joy and sometimes in sorrow. We human beings seek quite naturally to connect with the divine, with the transcendent, with that which is beyond our ordinary comprehension and experience. Seeking God is as natural, says Ficino as a dog barking or a horse neighing.

That simple truth explains a lot. It explains why so many people who have amassed material wealth or status or knowledge still feel fundamentally empty. It’s why no matter how much science explains the universe, so many of us still sense that mystery is still at work. It’s what stirred in the monk Thomas Moore, who says, “I remember when I was thirteen and left a loving family to enter a religious order. I, too, was reaching for more than what I saw around me. I didn’t really know what I was after, but I knew I wanted to reach as high as I could.”² It’s why the fears each of us trembles to speak and the hopes each of us dares not to dream, we do speak and we do dream in church, and in our conversations with God.

And surely it was this natural inclination for something more and greater and mystical that motivated Jesus’ disciples. So strong was that impulse that we read they dropped their nets at Jesus’ simple bid, “Follow me.” So strong was the impulse that even though they often did not understand his meaning, they continued faithfully with him day after day in the countryside and in the towns. So strong was that impulse that they thought Jesus could mightily unseat the Roman Empire and be the true Son of David, conqueror, empire builder, and restorer of God’s chosen people.

And so, that last week was crushing disappointment. It’s hard to know what they thought of the previous Sunday, that day they entered Jerusalem. The ambivalence is carried forward even to today, when we often refer to the day as Pal/Passion Sunday. Was it a triumphal entry? Was it the beginning of the end?

I imagine the disciples’ insides were churning and conflicted. Was this really their best hope come true? Were they walking into Jerusalem to dismantle Rome? Maybe. But even though they had tried to ignore it, Jesus’ former words had crept into their minds – “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” (Mark 8:31) And even if he had not troubled them with these words, their own doubts would have plagued them. What are we against the legions of Rome? What if we are wrong? What if God doesn’t save us? I know I would have been asking those questions. If I were Peter, I would have been wearing one of those bumper stickers that says, “I’d rather be

fishing.”

As the week progressed, the evidence grew. The week was looking worse and worse. The authorities were irritated, and Jesus wasn't helping much. He tipped things over in the temple. He embarrassed the leaders. But all the while there was no evidence that Jesus would actually defend himself, much less overturn the empire. And yet there was also no evidence he would make a run for it, escape in the night. Instead Jesus told his disciples of sorrow and the world's hatred and that they would be scattered. Every day the storm clouds grew thicker and heavier.

Then came that night in the garden. The government called it an arrest. They also called what followed a trial. It was all very disturbing to the disciples, and it was hard to tell what was more troubling them – the sham that passed for justice, or the utter passivity with which Jesus accepted defeat. In the end their worst fears were realized. Rome was unmoved. Jesus had been little more than an itch. He was dispatched quickly. Except for a few friends and followers, the city hardly took notice. Friday night they slept fitfully, if at all. For on Friday night they had to begin facing that all they had hoped Jesus would be for them and do for them was simply a mistake.

Marsilio Ficino says that religion, the impulse to encounter and believe in the transcendent is as natural as breathing. But on Good Friday night, Jesus' disciples had to accept that Jesus had stopped breathing, and so too had their confidence in, their hopeful longing for God. We read that they closed themselves behind locked doors and hid out in fear and in despair.

Come Sunday morning, there seemed nothing left to do, except maybe the simple things one does in the days after death. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb before dawn, in the dark. Mary went to pay her respects, to grieve. The Gospel of John says that Jesus had already been wrapped with the spices when he was buried. Mary comes, then, as we all have, to the grave-side of a loved one to remember, to pray, to mourn, to carry on a bit of a conversation, and inevitably to feel the disappointment that even the longest and best-lived life leaves behind when it passes.

Mary arrives at Sunday morning with her hope extinguished. But she is in for a surprise. There is a great irony in that. Just at the moment when the flames of her hope for something beyond the common possibilities have gone out, surprises begin to happen. There's something to think about here. Just when Mary comes to the tomb expecting nothing, she finds surprises. Mary came with no agenda left. I wonder if we don't all sometimes try to provide God the agenda more than we are prepared to listen to God's. Those who followed Jesus sure did. But now, Easter morning, Mary expected nothing at all. She had given up her plans and dreams. And it was then that the glory of that morning began to unfold.

But even then the disciples didn't fully comprehend what was going on. In John the angels in the tomb come later. John's version is quite different from the other Gospels. Mary finds the stone gone. She retrieves Simon and the other disciple. They rush to the tomb. They look in. They see nothing. And the disciples return home.

Mary, too, seems to have resigned herself to the facts. Jesus is gone. His body has been taken, which only deepens her sorrow. Then the angels come. “They say to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She says to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’” And now the gardener shows up and asks her the same question. She says,

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

And then comes perhaps the most tender single word in all the Bible. It’s not the gardener. It’s Jesus, whom Mary has not recognized. Jesus addresses her by name, “Mary.” One word and a galaxy full of emotion. And now Mary recognizes Jesus and responds with like fondness, “Rabbouni.”

I love Easter morning. We have tulips and lilies, great hymns and music, even trumpet. We sing and preach and pray the resurrection, all to declare the power of this day. It is a grand celebration. It is a gala to express just what a wild and surprising and wonderful thing happened on Easter morning. It is a good and wonderful thing, the way we celebrate Easter. But it’s funny, we do all the flowers and music and even getting up at dark hours for an early service, we do them to convey the emotion and reality of that simple exchange: “Mary.” “Rabbouni!”

Ficino says our yearning for God and faith are part of our very being as humans. Very often that expresses itself as a desire for more than we experience. Thomas Moore quotes a psychotherapist who says that the reason humans are so interested in things spiritual is because, “We all want more than what is.”³

That’s probably right, but it puts us on a path which traverses a very tricky ridge. Very often the desire for more than what is means that we long for the grass on the other side of the fence. The disciples yearned for something more than what was, and they looked to Jesus to create a new world order as the answer to their yearning. To be fair to the disciples, their longing was not entirely, or even mostly material. But they wanted Jesus to be that transcendent reality which would lead them to the kingdom of heaven, a place and an existence, maybe a spiritual experience far above that which they knew.

There are a million ways to want more than what is. And most of them entail our attempts to trade in this reality for a better one. And that is just where so many of us tumble off the ridge. That moment outside the tomb on Easter morning when Jesus and Mary Magdalene address each other is a profound moment of recognition. The transcendent had been in Mary’s presence all along. It had been walking day after day with the disciples. But all that time they were busy wondering about where Jesus would take them. They failed entirely to appreciate the fact that everything they wanted was standing right there in front of them. Only when Mary cried, “Rabbouni,” did she for the first time recognize him fully. Only then did she understand that she and all of them had been close to the heart of transcendence all along.

Thomas Moore says of those he has known who were the most holy that, “They seem extraordinarily present in the mundane situation before them. Their spirituality is not outside this world but consists in a seeping of the spirit from the particulars of the ordinary. The more engrossed they are in this momentary world, the more eternal their vision seems to be.”⁴ Surely as we read the Gospels that characterizes Jesus. Who was ever more present to the particulars of the pain and circumstances and people that he encountered than Jesus was? Over and over again he tried to tell those who were with him that this was the path to the kingdom of God.

We have this longing for transcendence, for something more than what is. That often gets us grasping for something a long way away. But Jesus wants us to know that this finding of transcendence starts a lot closer than we think. It is right to wish for more than what is. But what Jesus means is that there is a lot more in what is before us than we appreciate. There is a lot more holy and transcendent in what is than we often see in what is.

So, then, is Easter about resurrection and life eternal and Jesus raised from the dead? Oh yes, it is. But the paradox is that the only door to that transcendent truth is the door which leads through your life and all its joys and sorrows. Easter is not escapism. Marx was wrong about religion. When religion is an opiate, it is but a superficial medicine. But in real religious expression there is a profound mystery at work. For as one learns to lean into what is, one sees that what is is more than it looked like it was. As one leans into what is, one's understanding is opened up as it was for those disciples on the road to Emmaus, or for Mary at the tomb, or for the disciples ultimately behind locked doors, who suddenly recognized the risen Christ in their midst. I guess it makes a certain kind of sense that when one recognizes that the ordinary is really quite extraordinary, that then the extraordinary things one has been reaching for are found close by. But I still get surprised every time I experience how close by is the heart of transcendence, how close by is the risen Christ. Amen.

1. Quoted by Thomas Moore, in the Winter 2002 issue of "Spirituality and Health."
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid

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