

Text: John 20: 1-18
Title: Resurrection Revelation
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We stand on the threshold of a great mystery.
Let's come at it this way...

Rocky and Julieta met as teen-agers in a café in Buenos Aires, shared a first kiss in September, and tied the knot the following April. They moved to Boston, raised two children, and were married for 55 years.

When Julieta died Rocky was shattered.

He didn't know what to do or how to keep going, so he went to the cemetery and sat by her grave. He went because it seemed fitting. He went because of love. In his words, "She is part of me, so here I am whole. And being here makes me feel better. Not good, but better. I do it for Julieta, and for myself."

So, every morning, Rocky would unfold his blue lawn chair, get out a few pictures and the day's paper, and spend the day by Julieta's tombstone. He rarely ate or drank out of respect and so that he didn't have to go to the bathroom. On special occasions like her birthday, or the anniversary of their first kiss, he would drink a toast with sparkling cider. And at the end of each day he would pray before sprinkling crumbs near the grave so that the chipmunks would keep her company during the night.

Rocky kept vigil at Julieta's grave every day ~ rain or shine ~ for some 20 years. As news of his devotion spread people begin to stop by to listen to his story, share their own journeys, and remember loved ones. Rocky died at 97 and was buried next to Julieta.

When Jesus died Mary was shattered.

She didn't know what to do or how to keep going. So, on that first day of the week, before first light, she went to his grave. She went because it seemed fitting. She went because of love. She went to feel more whole....

There are multiple Marys in the gospels. The Mary in our text is not identified in relation to another person; she is not someone's mother, wife, or sister. We know she hails from Magdala (a fishing village on the northwest shores of the Sea of Galilee), was healed of seven demons, and left her home to follow Jesus. But, in far too many movies, books, or sermons, without one shred of biblical evidence, she gets cast as a reformed prostitute, a woman of ill-repute who got saved. As one writer puts it:

In the #MeToo movement, some women are ignored, others are pushed into the shadows and still others are discredited as loose women who are the source of their own folly. Mary Magdalene suffered all three treatments – including a smear campaign that has lasted nearly 2,000 years.

What is clear in the gospels is that Mary of Magdala stuck close to Jesus.

When others abandoned him, she stayed close to the cross; while the others slept, she got up and went to his grave. Even after Simon Peter and John left the empty tomb, Mary still stuck close. She didn't go back home, contact the authorities, or go looking for Jesus, but as the day broke she stayed by the tomb door.

She stayed at the last and only place she knew Jesus to be. She stayed because the disappearance of his body felt like one more confusing brutal blow. She stayed because of love. She unfolded her blue lawn chair, sat down, and wept.

Mary had no idea where Jesus was until Jesus came to her.

Dear friends, it seems worth noting that the resurrection stories swing not on the disciples finding Jesus but on Jesus finding them. The disciples are not searching for or seeking after Jesus; Jesus is the one who comes to them and pushes back the darkness to be seen. Consider....

Mary mistakes him for the gardener until he says her name. The two walking the road to Emmaus don't recognize him until he breaks bread and disappears. The disciples, locked in the upper room, are terrified until he appears and shows them his wounds. Thomas doesn't believe it until Jesus does the same for him. Even his friends on the beach don't know it's him until he tells them where to catch fish.

You get the point. William Willimon puts it this way:

The scriptures don't report early Jesus sightings; they describe Jesus' appearances. It's an important difference. Resurrection revelation is entirely in God's hands, something God does.

That seems like an important distinction. Whatever the resurrected Jesus was.... his appearance to his followers required his initiative and his activity. That's not to dispute or deny the resurrection, but it is to suggest that what happened in the tomb doesn't seem to be a matter of attention for the gospel writers.

Again, Willimon:

In resurrection, God not only defeats death but also overcomes the limits of human perception and relationship. The first result of resurrection was not eternal life for us but rather appearance to us, revelation.

Mary weeps by the empty tomb, names her loss to the angels, and wonders where the gardener moved the body. The one who stuck closest to Jesus gets it wrong until Jesus reveals his identity. And that is to say that God comes to us.

Resurrection seems to require revelation.

Like sunlight pushing back the darkness God pushes back our dimness.

God in Christ, not bound by death but loosed and alive, reveals himself to us.

God comes to us....

God comes to us.

God comes to us in the long-love of a friend.

God comes to us in an unexpected expression of mercy.

God comes to us in some sustaining support even in life's hardest losses.

God comes to us in the life of his gathered community.

God comes to us in the circle of an AA meeting.

God comes to us in a still, small voice.

God comes to us in acceptance for who we are.

God comes to us in the restless and relentless notion that this world was made for a Kingdom and not an empire.

God comes to us in this ancient text and in this ancient practice.

God comes to us....

Maybe you've seen him.

The good news of Easter is not found in how Jesus unwrapped the burial cloth and put on a gardener's cloak, but in how the resurrected Jesus reveals himself and calls us by name.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes about it this way:

In the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we see that God is for us and with that we can no longer be defined according to death or a religion-based worthiness system. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken, and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near. Nothing else gets to tell us who we are.

Therefore, metaphorically, I stay by the empty tomb not because I understand the nature of the resurrection but because as the resurrection is true then every vestige of death is ultimately defeated. I stay by the empty tomb because as the resurrection is true then eventually nothing will deter the mercy and forgiveness of God. I stay by the empty tomb because as the resurrection is true then love has the last word and there is nothing to fear. Therefore, I stay by the empty tomb and wait....

I stay here,

in the church,

in faith,

riddled with doubts, questions, inconsistencies, longing,

but here,

by the empty tomb....

One last thing.

In this tender exchange where Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener ~ she hears her name, reaches toward him, and he responds:

Don't hold onto me....

Don't cling to me...

The translation of the phrase is problematic; a more wooden, literal translation might read, “Don’t touch me...” It is a decidedly odd response. You would think even if Jesus wasn’t a “hugger” he would see her astonishment-relief-joy and welcome her embrace. But, he says:

*Don’t hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.
Go instead ...*

Now. Maybe he meant don’t hold onto this body, or don’t hold onto this moment or the mystery of how this happened ~ because, again, it’s not about the resurrection it’s about the revelation. Which is why I like the translation, “Don’t cling to me....”

Don’t cling but go....

Don’t cling but go and tell the others.

Don’t cling but go and celebrate that death is defeated.

Don’t cling but go and live without fear.

Don’t cling but go....

Dear friends, scripture pays little attention to what happened in the tomb. Don’t look there for certainty or clarity. But, the good news of the whole story of scripture is encapsulated in the resurrection accounts.

God doesn’t abandon us to darkness or death but God comes to us.

From the Garden of Eden to the garden tomb God comes to us.

Therefore, don’t be afraid...

God in Christ has come to you.

God in Christ calls your name.

God in Christ is risen and loose in this world.

Don’t be afraid....

It’s not that we cling to Jesus but Jesus has hold of us.

So, go. Fold up your blue lawn chair and go with Mary of Magdala to proclaim,

“I have seen the Lord!”

Alleluia!

Amen.