

The Reverend Laura Palmer  
St. Martin in the Fields  
Easter Sunday Year A  
April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## A Tale of Two Marys

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be acceptable to thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

Alleluia! The Lord is risen indeed.

Easter and I go back a long way but it took me over half a century to realize just how far. I love Christmas, but I need Easter. It was somehow, bred into my bones.

Once, in a dark moment in my mother's life, when I was a teenager and her only confidant, I blurted out, "After every Good Friday comes Easter." I don't know where those words came from but they came. We wrote that the Easter cards we sent to each other in the following years.

Easter has brought me to turning points in my life on several occasions. One of the most dramatic, as it would turn out, happened at an Easter Sunday brunch at the Plaza Hotel in NY. In talking with a friend about desire to leave television news and my growing interest in death and dying and he said, "You should go to Union Theological Seminary and study with Ann Ulanov. Very long story short, a year later I did. I was ordained here in 2019, right before the pandemic, which led me here to you this morning, preaching for the very first time on an Easter Sunday. As an associate priest I usually preach on Palm Sunday. I am delighted to share this moment with you.

While all the gospel accounts of the resurrection vary and reflect the different perspective of the narrators, the essential story is the same, and I find the most intimate in John, which led me a realization this year I'd never had before.

The joy of this morning grew from the courage of two women, Mary of the womb, and Mary of the tomb. Our faith depends on them and their courage—in one of its oldest meanings comes in French the words “cœur large” or large heart.

While it took the church 2,000 years to ordain women, it's clear God had no trouble trusting women to carry his word.

The torture and betrayal of the crucifixion was set in motion by the decisions and cowardice of men —Pilate, Judas, Peter, and the high priests. But a woman still played an enormous role—remember it was Pilate's wife who tried, and failed, to prevent the crucifixion by insisting on Jesus's innocence.

The Easter story is so monumental and so familiar that we often overlook the courage of God and his great gamble in having Jesus be one of us—a gamble every parent knows well.

There would be no Easter without the bold courage of Mary's “Yes” – a yes to something preposterous. From the virgin womb of an unwed teenager, our savior, Jesus, would be born. It was unimaginable. Despite the risk, the danger, the potential of shame and rejection in her culture where she was already powerless, Mary said “Yes,” with a courage born of love.

With a courage born of terror, grief, and love, Jesus was born into his eternal life because Mary of the tomb refused to leave. She became the midwife of the resurrection because *she stayed with her pain* until Jesus called her name.

“Mary.”

“Rabbuni?”

Are there any more tender words in scripture?

Mary Magdalene didn't recognize him at first. Perhaps she was blinded by grief—which is what grief does-- Or perhaps like the virgin birth itself, it was incomprehensible to her that the man she loved and saw crucified on the cross was alive again and calling her name.

“Mary!”

“Rabbuni!”

The crucified Jesus was alive and calling her name.

The disciples ran away from the cross— with the exception of John—but the women stayed. When first confronting the empty tomb, the disciples bolted again, but Mary Magdalene stayed, the first to see the resurrected Jesus. Again, God's great gamble was rested on a woman—a woman who stayed with her pain.

“Why are you weeping?”

This question is posed to Mary both by the angel and “the gardener” in John's narrative. Theologian Debie Thomas, points to the power of this question when she writes:

The question honors sorrow as a legitimate and faithful pathway to revelation. Mary Magdalene sees Jesus because she stays in the place where her pain is. She stands and weeps, giving the grief, desolation, hopelessness, and the agony of her circumstances their due. She refuses to abandon what is real, even what is real is unbearable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, Debie, Journey with Jesus, A Weekly Webzine, “Risen,” April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Blessed is she who mourns, she who stayed with her pain, who stayed in the seemingly unyielding darkness of Good Friday. We know, what she didn't, which is that Easter always comes. It comes for us reliably to us like clockwork in three days, 72 hours, and it comes to us in triumph with bright lights and blaring trumpets.

The first Easter though, was anything but. It was terrifying, chaotic, and dark like the morning of 9/11 when the towers came down and people ran in terror, confusion, and disbelief. Mary Magdalene was a woman mad with grief.

The resurrection is glorious, it is triumphant, it is unlike anything that has happened in the world before or since, but it began in darkness as creation always does and always has since the beginning of time. God created the world in darkness. We were all conceived in darkness. Just outside the church, gigantic magnolia tree whose bare branches have exploded in a riot of pink to see the abundant life that is bestowed on us over and over and over again.

Imagine what Mary Magdalene felt when in the intimacy of her reunion with Jesus was he said, "Do not hold onto me," which is no doubt all she wanted to do. The words feel harsh. Like it or not, Jesus tells her she must now bear witness. Writes Reverend Shannon Kershner:

....gloom and violence had lost its power and claim on us forever. Mary's calling was to live, to proclaim and to trust that Easter transformative power. with everything she had. She had to be one of God's midwives of hope.<sup>2</sup>

Like Mary of the womb, who proclaimed "My soul doth magnify the Lord, Mary of the tomb was charged with proclamation. As are we all. The bunnies and the chocolate are part of the hoopla and commercialization of Easter.

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<sup>2</sup>Kershner, Shannon, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017

But the real meaning of Easter is simpler and profound which is what we touch in these early hours, just after dawn, captured in these words by N.T. Wright:

When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through Jesus, as a result of which the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God's future has arrived in the present.<sup>3</sup>

Mary of the womb brought Jesus to life where he was ultimately crucified by the evil in a Good Friday world where death and destruction still too often prevail.

But Mary of the tomb, who had the courage to stay with the agony of her sorrow, was the midwife of the resurrection, a midwife of God's hope for the world, which was, and is, in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

Which brings me back to the beginning. I went to seminary sparked by a friend's suggestion at an Easter brunch. When I graduated, I was convinced I'd never be ordained and yet here I am, someone who somehow always kept quietly responding to whisper of God. I wish I could say it was a bold yes, but actually, it was more like, "Well, okay."

And then in the course of the ordination process, I had to find the date of my baptism. My mother had forgotten. "I just remember that you were about a year old." I called the Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois, where was baptized. Karen in the church office said she'd look in the archives.

A few months later she called me back.

"You're an Easter baby, baptized on Easter Sunday, March 25<sup>th</sup>. As it happened, that year Easter was also the feast day of the annunciation, the day of Mary's bold YES.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, N.T., *Simply Christian, Why Christianity Makes Sense*

Alleluia, Alleluia!

AMEN