

16 April 2017

Voices of Easter
Matthew 21:1-17

Mary: I have never had a problem making connection with other people, only with having relationships. You see the difference, don't you? We women are raised to think of ourselves in the middle of – it's like a spider's web or something – of connections with other people. We don't think about ourselves apart from other people. So I've always had my family and my neighbors and the other women my age around me, at least before I got sick. Then I was alone.

But even before the sickness, I was alone. You see being connected is great, but all it meant for me was that I was never really myself but only whoever I needed to be in the group I was with at that moment. I was always playing a role – Mother's girl, Daddy's princess, Zechariah's sister, the unmarried girl, that woman from Magdala. Like most of the other women I know, I was always defining myself by how I was connected to other people, and by their expectations of me. I didn't know who I was when I was alone, which 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 out the demons and restored me to my right mind – all he asked me was my name. He didn't ask if I had a husband or children, who my parents or family were, or where I was from. He just asked my name. "Mary." And then he didn't make any comment about the name, or what it made him think of, or someone else he knew with that name – I didn't find out until months later that his mother is also named Mary. He just said, "I am glad to know you, Mary." He didn't want to know *about* me. He just wanted to know me.

As I said, he was different. Too different, I see now. When you were around Jesus, you couldn't help thinking that this was what all men – all *people* – ought to be like, and there are only two ways to respond to that: you can either try to be more like him or you can hate him. It was easier to hate, 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'd ever cared about me die.

The Beloved Disciple: I wasn't one of his earliest followers. He was up in Galilee, and I'm from Jerusalem. While he was healing people and irritating 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 go listen to an untrained workman from Nazareth when I had the best and brightest in my family 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 who'd been begging there for so long that I didn't even see him anymore. I just stepped over him on the way to worship. But it wasn't just that he healed him: it was what he said. When his disciples asked Jesus whose sin had caused the man to be born blind, Jesus said that it wasn't about sin at all. He was born the way he was born to glorify God. He didn't answer his disciples' question; he answered the one they *should* have been asking. Not why was he born incomplete but why was he born at all. I'd never heard anything like it.

So when he returned to Galilee, I followed – incognito. Jesus had had enough trouble with the priests that I didn't want anyone to hear my name and connect me to my family. I borrowed some clothes from one of the servants, so as to blend in, and I just stayed in the

background, saying nothing, trying to avoid eye contact. I tried to look like a nobody and just listened. Jesus knew I was there, though. Every now and then he'd catch my eye and grin at me affectionately. It was a little scary, actually. I never knew you could be a nobody and still be liked.

I was with him when he went back to Jerusalem. I was with him when he stopped at Bethany and raised Lazarus from the dead, and I was beside him when he told Martha, "I am the resurrection. I am life." And I was still with him on the day of preparation for the Passover, when he went to have dinner with his disciples. He looked over to the edge of the crowd, made eye contact with me, and said, "You come, too." So I did.

I was there. I was there when he washed our feet. I was there when he said that one of us would betray him, that all of us would run away. I was there in the garden when the soldiers arrested him, and I was there in the court, watching my father's friends, people I had known all my life, condemn him to death. And the next day I was there at the foot of his cross, standing beside Mary his mother and Mary from Magdala when he looked down from his pain, caught my eye one more time, and said, "Take care of my mother."

His mother looked up at me, hesitantly, and said, "I've seen you around, but I'm afraid I don't know your name."

I replied, "My name doesn't matter. I'm just someone that your son loved, and that's all I care about."

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.'* ³*Then 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 on the first day of the week – and whoever would have thought that I would choose to sit with an illiterate fisherman instead of my own family, but somehow being with others who mourned Jesus was all that mattered – when Mary, the one from Magdala, came rushing in with her story about the stone rolled away from the tomb. A million thoughts came rushing in. Mary was saying something about someone stealing the body, but I knew that wasn't it. I had no proof, but I knew all the same. Nothing about this Jesus could be explained by ordinary means. Not the story of his birth that his mother had told me the day before, not the way he lived, not the way he died.

Peter started running toward the garden, pretty fast for someone his size, but I passed him easily. And there was the tomb, open just like Mary said. I looked inside. He was gone, but the grave wrappings were still there. So, obviously not thieves. Why would thieves unwrap him before leaving? Peter rushed inside past me, and I followed. I stood in wonder looking about me at the place where death was supposed to be, and wasn't. I didn't understand. I still don't, but back then I *really* didn't. I didn't even realize that this had been foretold. All my studies of the law and prophets, and I hadn't seen it. Now I see it all through scripture, but back then all I had to hold on to was Jesus' words to Martha: "I am the resurrection. I am life."

And without even knowing what it was I was believing, I believed.

Mary: The three of us stood in the garden for a few minutes, none of us knowing what to say. Peter just looked confused, but the new man, 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. And then they left me alone 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. It didn't occur to me until later to wonder why Peter and the other disciple hadn't mentioned them, but at the time all I could think was how callous they were. One of them said, "Why are you crying?"

"Because that's my friend's tomb! I saw them lay his body there, and now they've taken it away, and I don't know where! That's why I'm crying!" They didn't seem concerned, so I whirled around to leave and almost ran into the gardener. I stumbled and started to fall, but he caught me. "Careful!" he said. Then he looked me in the face. "Why are you crying?"

"Sir," I sobbed, "if you're the one who moved Jesus' body, could you tell me where you've laid him? I just want to say goodbye. He was my friend. He was 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 something, but just me."

He smiled. Then he said, "Mary."

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One of the curious things about the resurrection narratives is *how* people recognized Jesus when they encountered him. 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 recognized him when he broke bread at the table. This anonymous disciple whom Jesus loved didn't have to see him at all to believe. He believed when he saw what was not. And Mary? Mary recognized him only when he spoke her name. Everyone experienced the incarnate Christ the same way; everyone experienced the Risen Christ differently.

It is Easter. Christ is risen. But not everyone perceives the Risen Christ, because none of our usual methods of perceiving reality work here. We're used to trusting the evidence of our own eyes, testing truth by physical and 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*. (Even saying those words makes me feel a little queasy.) No, it's real. Christ actually rose from the grave – rose to a qualitatively different sort of life, recognizable and yet not in the usual ways, physical and yet beyond physics. The resurrection is real – if anything, it's *more* real than the world of the senses. If it were not than we would be just playing games here, amusing ourselves with vacuous spirituality and smug good works until we die.

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

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.