

Sermon for Easter Day, 2

Year C

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What, we might wonder, was on the mind of Mary, also called the Magdalene, on that Easter morning when she went to the tomb? There are dozens of speculative commentaries on who Mary of Magdalene was, whether she was a noble woman or a prostitute, whether Magdalene referred to a town or to some other characteristic attributed to her. Others, including the novelist Dan Brown, argue that she was the Beloved Disciple of the Gospel According to John.

What is absolutely clear from every account was that she deeply loved Jesus, that she was certainly present at his death, and that she was the one who discovered that his body was gone from its tomb. She was the one who came that Sunday morning with ointments and spices to finish the burial anointing of Jesus' body, and her confusion over the body's absence shows us one of the most intimately personal moments in the bible. We can relate to her sorrow and her joy. We take comfort that our loved ones are in heaven, but we're not so sure of what that means to not ache with sorrow. Mary has seen angels in the tomb, and yet she also weeps with personal sorrow. She doesn't know what to make of it.

When at last she turns around and sees Jesus before her, she is not able to recognize him. It would not be surprising to think that she couldn't recognize him because she didn't expect to see him, but she pleads with him to reveal where her master has been hidden. Then Jesus calls her by her own name, and she rejoices to recognize him.

But there is one more twist in this story. Overjoyed to see and recognize that he is alive, she approaches him to touch him and hold him, but he stops her. In essence he tells her that she cannot come to him in a familiar way, but that she has to relate to him as one who is alive, but in a different place. "I am ascending to my Father," he tells her, and with that he redefines the meaning of life and death between them. He is on one side of the veil, and she is on the other.

Perhaps that is the true Easter for us. The fact is, death remains. The resurrection of Jesus didn't stop it coming for you or for me. We can imagine what the resurrection is, but it is not something we can grasp or possess. It remains a mystery. We, who are on this side of the veil, can take some comfort from the fact that Jesus Christ ends the inevitability of death and opens for us a gate to eternal life. But it is not a gate we pass back and forth between, and it is not a gate that admits our beloved to rejoin our company on this side. With Mary we ask, where have they gone? Even if the answer comes clearly to us, we will not be able hold them, and will still be left with our weeping. Even so, it will be a weeping tinged with hope, not despair.

If I could beg your indulgence for a few minutes, I'd like to share with you a little of what I have learned about dying, and a little of how that has deepened my own hope in the resurrection.

For example, being with the dying has taught me how precious this life is. Few of us die easily. For most of us it is very hard work, usually taking years of illness and weakening bodies before we can finally let go of this life. This life is at least a foretaste of the next, and even if it is only a shadowland, as C. S. Lewis called it, it is wonderful enough to be our delight. In the movie *Michael*, where John Travolta plays a rather grimy and bohemian archangel, the angel sits one morning watching a sunrise. His time on earth is about at its end, and it is unlikely he will ever return. The angel weeps and says, "I'm going to miss this so much." Amen.

I've also learned that since dying is hard, and because it usually takes many years to finish the process, it's never too early to start paying attention to who your friends are. If all your friends are your age, and you live to be 90, there won't be many people at your funeral. If you want a big funeral, either die young, or at age 40 make friends with some people who are twenty, and at age 60 make friends with some people who are twenty, and at age 80, make friends with people who are twenty. It will keep you more aware of what is happening on this side of the curtain, and your dreams won't be limited just to dreams of death. Spend time with people younger than yourself, and let their enthusiasm to be alive keep you from taking what you have for granted.

In a similar vein, I think it's never too soon to pick out a nursing home. Dying is hard work, and most of us are going to need help with it. To think we'll be able to accomplish everything that dying will require of us on our own and independently is not only foolish, it's usually selfish. What we can be in charge of is setting the plans in place when we are strong, so that when we are weak we've already prepared a safety net. Talk to your family about what places you feel most at home in, and start to check in to how insurance and contracts are negotiated. The best way to pick a nursing home is to start volunteering in some of them, and see what goes on there first hand.

Last for now, listen closely to people who are already making that journey and watch for the signs of the greater life, opened for humanity by the death and resurrection of Jesus. In my own life there was Alexandra, dying of cancer, and who the night before she died saw Jesus at the foot of her bed as Mary came and sat beside her to assure her that it would be all right. Her whole demeanor changed at once, and she described the comfortable words Mary was speaking to her. There was Peter, a middle aged surgeon, who began to have dreams of patients and family members who had died coming to him to tell him that they loved him. This was three months before he died, and Peter never wanted to be thought of as a Christian.

There are lots of stories like I heard about a friend named Harry, who was slipping away but had about two hours of being awake and lucid in his last day. He

was able to swap some stories with his poker buddies and greet his daughter before slipping back into a final sleep. There was Linda's mother, who snapped out of her coma, sang Easter hymns with her daughter, got out of bed and danced through the nursing ward blessing other patients, came back to be and died almost at once. There was Vicki's grandmother, who on the night before she died kept saying she was ready to go home. The family kept telling her she couldn't go home, and she kept insisting that she was ready and that she could see it. After about a half an hour of this, they finally noticed that she had suddenly regained her hearing and sight. She could not only see her home, she could see her family members and friends.

The shadow of death is never far from our door. May it teach us to value the days we have, deepen our faith in the resurrection of Jesus, and prepare ourselves for that journey, which, of all the things I could ever tell you about, is the one thing that is inevitable. So may this mystery we call Easter fill all your days.