

“The Easter Journey”

John 20:1-18

The well known Chinese proverb says that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” Mary Magdalene's Sunday morning walk to the garden tomb just outside of Jerusalem would have been too short, in one sense, to be called a journey.

Yet in another sense that is exactly what it was, a soul-transforming journey. In the relatively short walk she took early that Easter morning Mary traveled from the land of deep darkness to the land of eternal light, from the “slough of Despond” to the “Celestial City,” from fear to hope, from despair to joy. In all four Gospels Mary takes this same journey, but in the other three she has companions. Matthew says that “the other Mary” was with her. But which other Mary? There are several. Mark tells us she was accompanied by Salome and Mary the mother of James. But which James? There are a lot of them, too. And if you take Luke's word for it there was a whole group of women who went to the tomb early that Sunday morning.

But here in the Fourth Gospel, Mary goes alone. Easter morning in this Gospel is not a group experience, but a solitary one, sad and lonely. This writer, more than any other, seems to be interested in individuals and in how the individual comes to faith. If he were here today and could speak to us I think he would say to us that the faith experience is intensely personal. This is not to deny the importance of a faith community. There are lots of examples of the community in this Gospel, times when the disciples draw strength from each other. But I think he would tell us that in the end each of us must come to the faith experience in our own unique way. And he packs his Gospel full of stories about individuals who encounter Jesus.

People like Nicodemus. Do you remember him? Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one of those upright and uptight strict religious types who dot their theological i's and cross their theological t's and quote Bible verses and give the reference. We have come to know Pharisees in the Gospels as arrogant, obtuse and almost universally opposed to Jesus. But Nicodemus is different. Rather than being full of certainty and dogmatism, he seems to be full of wondering. He has what the Buddhist's call “a beginner's mind.” And so one evening when the sun has gone down, he slips out of his house and makes his way to Jesus because he has some questions and he is curious about this strange, unconventional rabbi. And the walk Nicodemus takes that evening is nothing less than a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey.

And then, in contrast from this respectable, scrupulously religious male who comes to Jesus in the dark of night, the writer of this Gospel next gives us a less than respectable, non-observant Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus in broad daylight. They meet at the well outside of a village at high noon, an unusual time for a woman in that culture to draw water. The other women would come in the morning. This woman came at noon to avoid the other women. She was not well-liked. She was considered a threat. She was that kind of woman. On this day when she gets to the well there is a man there, a Jew of all things there in Samaria, who proceeds to break every social and religious code she can think of, by asking her for a drink of water. And then this man starts telling her about what he calls “living water,” and she says that she would like some of that. And by the time the conversation is over her life has changed. A walk to the town well turned into a life-changing spiritual journey.

And it is only this Gospel writer who tells about doubting Thomas and his unique journey of faith that begins with his skepticism. (But that is the Gospel reading for next Sunday, so you'll have to come back to hear about that.) This is the Gospel of the individual encounter.

So here, on Easter morning the spotlight falls not upon a group of women, but upon Mary Magdalene alone. Nicodemus encountered Jesus in the evening, the Samaritan woman at noon. Mary Magdalene starts off on her life-altering journey before the sun is up. She makes her way through the dark streets of Jerusalem, out through the city gate to the garden tomb. And by focusing upon her alone, it seems to me, the Gospel writer is inviting all of us to think about our own spiritual journeys.

Where is it that we have come from, and where are we going on our spiritual journeys? Through what sorts of valleys and hills have we come, with what twists and turns, with what agonies and dark nights of the soul, with what doubts and questions? We come from different perspectives, we approach these matters from different angles. Some here would describe themselves as believers, some as doubters, skeptics or non-believers. But however we may describe ourselves we are all, I am convinced, travelers, sojourners, wayfarers on a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage of the soul.

Mary's journey that morning began in despair and then got worse. She thought that the worst that she could have imagined had happened. Then she got to the tomb and she discovered that there was more pain in store. Not only had her friend and Lord been crucified, but now someone had stolen his body. She would be deprived of even the small consolation of performing the traditional rituals of anointing. But before the *morning* was over, her *mourning* was also over. As soon as she heard her name spoken, her night became day.

And it was very much like that Psalm (126):

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongues with the shouts of joy.

Someone sent me a letter recently telling about his own journey that started with a strong faith growing up in a Christian family, then turned to atheism, then back to belief again. For myself the journey has been from a very literal kind of believing to other, less literal ways of understanding the Christian faith. For some others the journey may be in just the opposite direction, from no belief or a very liberal approach to one more literal. It should not be surprising to us that we have different journeys. We may pass one another on the spiritual path going different directions! As far as I am concerned, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we continue the journey.

So the writer of the Fourth Gospel shows us several different individuals in their journeys of faith:

- the curious and probably somewhat cloistered intellectual Nicodemus;
- the worldly-wise and well experienced woman at the well;
- the skeptical and individualistic Thomas;
- the devout and tender hearted Mary Magdalene.

I suspect that represented here this morning we have some Nicodemuses, intellectually curious folks who have questions. I know we have our fair share of Thomases here at Westminster, people who say to themselves, "well, I know what the creed says, but I don't necessarily buy it – I reserve the right to come to my own conclusions." Maybe we have a few worldly wise among us as well, like the woman at the well, but if so, I don't know who they are. And I suspect that there are some Mary Magdalenes here, people for whom the whole religious or faith enterprise is not something that for them is intellectual or speculative. They don't care what the scholars say, and they don't get too worked up about theology or questions and doubts. For them it is personal. Faith is about making connections, both spiritually and with other people. It is a matter of the heart.

So here is Mary standing at the empty tomb, all alone. Peter and John, who had come to the tomb at her bidding after she found it empty, have left. The only other person there is someone she takes to be the gardener, and two angels inside the tomb. The angels ask her: “Woman, why are you weeping?” “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

There may be some people here this morning who feel that way. Some who come here each Sunday and listen to the sermons that sound sometimes like Nicodemus asking his silly questions and other times like Thomas, raising all kinds of doubts. But where is Jesus? What have they done with the Jesus I grew up believing in? To those folks all I can say is that after all the questions have been asked and all the doubts raised, it still comes down to some sort of response of the heart.

The story has been told about the eminent Swiss theologian Karl Barth coming to the United States for a series of lectures. At one of these, during the question and answer period, someone asked him what was the greatest theological insight he had ever had. Barth paused for a bit, smiled, and then said: “Jesus loves me! This I know. For the Bible tells me so.”¹

And then there is my favorite Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, who tells about an pilgrimage she took one time during a sabbatical. I have shared this before. Her purpose was to hunt for a Jesus set free from her own culturally ingrained assumptions. She spent time in Turkey, Israel, and Kenya, ending her pilgrimage where President Obama visited last week, in Istanbul at the Aya Sophia, the ancient jewel of Christendom, then a mosque, now a museum. It was there, she said, that she went in search of an old mosaic of Christ that she had studied in school. And when she found it in a back corner on the second floor, she says, “it was bathed in light. Every gold tile was pretending to be the sun, and the face in the midst of them was so full of love for me that every hair on my arms stood up in recognition. Then I dissolved in tears and stood there crying without the first word to explain what had happened to me.”²

Much like Mary Magdalene standing there alone in the garden. “Woman, why are you weeping?” “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Then, the writer says, she turned and looked right at him, but still did not recognize him. And again, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” And the plaintive cry: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And this time, in response, Jesus speaks her name: “Mary.”

The Easter journey is for all kinds of folks, those whose lives are all put together neatly, and those whose lives are a little more messy. It is for those who have doubts and questions, who may cross their fingers when we recite the Apostles’ Creed, and it is for those who accept it all without any doubts. That journey that Mary Magdalene took on Easter morning is for all of us who are willing to leave the comfort of where we are to discover where we might be.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb....” It was a journey that began with the first step, a journey that started in darkness and ended in the light. And we are all invited to take that Easter journey ourselves.

¹ J. M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Downers Grove/London, 1986, 331.

² Journal for Preachers, Advent 96, p.8

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