

THE EASTER STORY IS OUR STORY

It was before sunrise on the day we call the first Easter. The garden was quiet. Jesus' tomb was silent. The world stood still. Through that early morning hush there walked a solitary figure. Mary Magdalene was her name. She had come to visit Jesus' tomb. Surprise shattered the early morning stillness. The stone had been rolled away from his tomb! She was startled by her discovery. She ran to tell Peter and John. She told them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb."

The men quickly sprang into action. They sprinted to the garden tomb. John reached the tomb first. He saw the linen cloths lying there but he didn't go in. Peter came panting behind. As we might expect of Peter, he walked right into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there. The napkin which had been on Jesus' head was also there, neatly in place. There were no signs of foul play. Finally John entered the tomb. He too saw the grave clothes neatly stacked. His intuition, it seems, told him that Jesus had risen from the tomb. John saw it all and believed. That is all that the gospel writer tells us. Peter and John then returned to the place they were staying in Jerusalem.

Mary Magdalene was still there. She stood weeping outside the tomb. Finally, she too, got up the courage to enter the tomb. Two angels greeted her. They sat, one at the place where Jesus' head had lain, one at the place where his feet would have been. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they asked Mary. "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him," she replied. She turned as she spoke; then jumped with a start. A man stood there. An ordinary looking man. "Woman, why are you weeping?" the man asked, picking up the words of the angels. "Whom do you seek?"

Mary still did not know who this man was. She supposed he was the gardener. She said to the strange man. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." These were bold words. Boldness was appropriate for her crucified master. She could not stand to think that someone had done something with his body. She would take it herself. It was not a very well thought out plan. Where, after all, might a woman go with a dead body on her hands? It was not well thought out at all. Bold, but not thought out.

The stranger spoke again. "Mary" he said. She knew that voice instantly. It is interesting, really. Mary didn't recognize the man when she looked upon him with her eyes. Her ears, however, were unailing. She would know that voice anywhere. It was his voice. "Ribbon!" she said to him. Ribbon simply means teacher. That is how she had always known him. He was a teacher. She would learn he was much more than a teacher.

Jesus spoke next. Mary had evidently held out her arms to him as a sign of recognition and affection. Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

We don't know, but we assume, that Mary Magdalene did as Jesus commanded her. She did not hold him. She went and told the disciples that he was ascending to his Father. That is what he had told them that he would do. He told them many times. We read Jesus' words about going to the Father in John 16, for example. In fact, it is almost impossible to grasp this whole scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene without reference to John 16. In John 16:5, Jesus said to his disciples, "now I am going to him who sent me." He had prepared the disciples for this reality. He had spoken of it many times. So when Mary came with this message, when she came reporting that Jesus was ascending to his Father, they surely remembered his words. Jesus had always connected his ascension, his going to his Father," with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Listen to these words from chapter 16: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Let me put this in some different words. Imagine Jesus saying the following: "I am to ascend to my Father. When I ascend to my Father, I will send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will make you the sons and daughters of my Father." If we put it all together in one place, that is what Jesus has been teaching and doing. That is why Mary couldn't hold him. If she could have held him, she would have had him for herself, but no one else would receive the benefit. He had not yet ascended to his father. When he ascends to his Father, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit. All people can become daughters and sons of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. But that work can only be done if Mary Magdalene lets him go. Mary Magdalene could not have this Easter story all to herself. That was not to be permitted. She had to let him go. She would have to let him ascend to his Father. Then, and only then, could the story of Easter be a story for every human person; then, and only then, can the story of Easter be our story too.

We can understand the import of this Mary Magdalene story, perhaps, by contrasting it to the very next verses in John's gospel. These verses narrate a story that took place on the first Easter evening. The disciples were gathered behind locked doors in fear of the Jews. Suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst. "Peace be with you," was his greeting. Jesus showed them his hands and his side. He commissioned them, these men who so recently had betrayed him, to be his disciples in the world. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

And then Jesus did something that indicates that his ascension to his father was complete. Mary Magdalene could not hold him because he had not yet ascended to his Father in order to send the Spirit to make us children of God. Between morning and evening, however, Jesus' ascension must have been completed. We read simply that he breathed on his disciples and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit." He could do for the

disciples what he could not do for Mary Magdalene. His ascension was now complete. He has ascended to his Father and now he could send the Spirit to the disciples making them God's children. His Father became their Father. His god became their God just as he had promised Mary Magdalene.

Don't hold me, Jesus had said to Mary. Jesus' word to Mary at first seems quite mysterious. Whatever could it mean? It is not so mysterious, however. As John's story of Jesus unfolds, Jesus time and time again states that he must go to his father; he must go to the one who had sent him. In John's Gospel, Jesus' going to his Father begins with his being lifted on the cross to die. His journey to his Father continues in his resurrection and ascension. Mary Magdalene encountered Jesus before his journey was complete.

I have already said that Mary Magdalene could not have this Easter story all to herself. Jesus' mission was not yet accomplished. He had yet to ascend to his Father. He had yet to send the Spirit. There is a lot of good news for us in this story of Mary Magdalene. The story of her encounter with the risen Jesus is not just a once-upon-a-time story. It is not just a story that happened long ago. This story is open to the future. This story is open to us. This Easter story is our story, too.

The Easter story begins with an earlier event. It begins with the death of Jesus. But this story is also about our death. Jesus' death gathers up our death into itself. Our death, therefore, is to be swallowed up in victory. Let us respond to this new reality with the words of Mary Magdalene: "I have seen the Lord." The Easter story is our story, too. The Easter story opens at the tomb. But this story is also about the tomb we shall one day inhabit. Jesus' tomb gathers our tomb into itself. And Jesus rolls away the door to our tomb. Let us respond to this new reality with the words of Mary Magdalene; "I have seen the Lord." The Easter story is our story too.

The Easter story presents to us the risen Lord. This story is also about the power of resurrection that is present in our lives. The risen Jesus offers to raise us to eternal life. Let us respond to this new reality with the words of Mary Magdalene; "I have seen the Lord." The Easter story is our story too.

The Easter story presents us with a Lord on the way to ascension to his Father. The story is also about the way that the ascended Lord sends the Spirit upon our lives to make us children of God. Let us respond to this new reality with the words of Mary Magdalene: "I have seen the Lord." The Easter story is our story too!!!