

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Easter Sunday
April 12, 2009

Isaiah 25.6-9
John 20.1-18

Dawning Faith

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. —
John 18.1

It is a little embarrassing to confess this in a town full of high-achiever types, but I'm not a morning person. If you want to start a complicated project at midnight, I'm your man. But the likelihood of passing me while you are out on your 6:00 am run is, well, nil. I'd be happy to join you for a 9 pm dinner meeting, but if a 7 am power breakfast is your thing, then you'd better find a different dining companion.

For me, mornings are a hazy and vulnerable time. To get through a morning well, for me there is a complex ritual of events that first need to happen. First off, a few snooze alarms. (We'll leave it at "a few.") O, that sweet, sweet button on the top of the alarm clock! Then, optimally, I need to sit up in bed and stare into the middle distance for a few minutes. Once partially awake, the next priority drives both my motivation and my activity: coffee! The beans are imported from a micro-roastery in Seattle. The water filtered. The ratio of water to coffee is carefully measured—ideally in advance, so that my timer-equipped coffee maker can have it ready for me.

The next few minutes usually involve sitting on the couch and saying over and over again, "I love coffee." Now I'm ready to face talking to family members, finding food, taking a shower, and getting out the door. Unfortunately for me, the snooze alarm part of the routine and the coffee part of the routine often are in tension with one another. Few mornings afford enough time for each to be fully implemented. Consequently, I leave the house in something of a fog. Carrying my coffee along with me alleviates it somewhat, but not completely.

The Gospel of John does not tell us if Mary Magdalene was a morning person or not. She's up early, no doubt, but for some reason I have the sense that this is not her optimal time of the day. She had a job to do—to tend to Jesus' grave and she was driven to do it. But it wouldn't surprise me if she had a “go cup” along just to help her get going.

John's version of the Easter story is not really a story about the resurrection of Jesus—none of the gospels narrate that, really. It is just a given, a piece of prerequisite information. John's story, though it involves some other characters as well, focuses mostly on Mary. It is the story of her dawning faith. Now, Mary's story is a lot more important than my rituals for coping with morning, but I'm struck by the fact that Mary, like me, is going through a process. I see it as a movement from duty to curiosity to confusion and, finally, to faith.

In the first few verses of chapter 18, Mary is a model first century woman of duty. Her character at this point has very little specific personality. She's something of a cardboard cutout, really. She goes to the tomb early to perform what in that culture was a woman's duty—to prepare bodies for proper burial. John's version of the story does not tell us that was why she went to the tomb, but we can assume it from the context and from the perspective provided by the other gospel accounts.

Duty continues to be the theme when Mary discovers the stone rolled away. She doesn't take action herself, she doesn't even stop to ponder the significance of the moment. She simply runs to tell the men—Peter and John. Mary's journey to Easter faith begins in the most pedestrian of ways. She's simply doing her duty as a woman—taking care of the details and letting the men figure out the meaning.

How many of us have started our journey of faith this way? Most of us, I suspect, first went to church because it was a duty imposed on us by a higher authority. (I.e., Mom!) Seldom do we start down the path to faith for very individual reasons. It is a family expectation, most likely. Or a cultural expectation—though less so all the time in our Post-Christendom society. Like Mary, the first steps are likely to be pretty ordinary.

Only in verse 11 does Mary really come alive as a three dimensional character. Peter and John have come and gone, apparently coming quickly to belief but also—oddly—returning home right away. “But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” As Mary’s character fills with emotion, something causes her to stay put. I sense curiosity at work—not the trivial curiosity that fuels gossip, but a deep sense that something important has happened here and it makes sense to stick around for a while. In this part of the story, Mary becomes an individual capable of faith. She has managed to wrench herself free from the mere demands of duty and culture. She wants to know for herself.

Has there been a moment of curiosity for you? You’re going to church. You’re trying to be a good person. But then things seem to matter, more seems to be at stake. Perhaps the Bible readings get more interesting or engaging. Or you decided to pick up a copy of a sermon from the web site. Or maybe you wonder what motivates the seemingly saintly person in the pew next to you. Why would someone devote that much time (or money, or energy) to God. All of the sudden—maybe after years of attending out of duty or habit or routine—you are engaged in a new way. You’re curious.

It would be nice, both for Mary and for us, if the period of curiosity was followed immediately by the gift of faith. But our story has it otherwise. The next part of the story is the part that makes me think Mary didn’t get her full allotment of morning coffee. It is a blurry, dreamlike sequence of verses. Driven by her curiosity, she looks again into the tomb. She sees two angels (angels?...extra shot of espresso, please) who ask her why she is crying. She imagines grave robbers have been at work. Then she turns around and sees Jesus, but mistakes him for a gardener. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him...”

Mary’s curiosity is followed, not by faith, but by confusion. She’s gotten herself to the right place. She’s cultivated an open mind. But the “answers” don’t flow right away. In fact, the more she ventures into the territory of faith, the more confusing it becomes. It can be the same for us, no? We get some energy for learning more, but then the complexity of the Bible or the diversity of the tradition or the simple ineffability of the mystery stymies us in our path.

Doctrines and scripture and beliefs can guide us, but they don't take the journey for us. We each will have our own twists and turns on the path to faith.

Finally, in our story, something happens to change everything. Mary goes from confusion to faith in an instant. It is like a miracle. What happens? Jesus speaks her name. Then she knows it is him. He finds a way of personal address that goes far beyond reason or mere analysis of the situation. He speaks and she hears.

“As he did with Mary,” theologian Serene Jones writes, “Jesus comes to us not as a general idea or an imagined ghostly figure, but as a presence that reaches beyond our mind’s overt powers of knowing and touches our lives in ways we cannot see. They are felt—tasted, touched, smelled, heard, seen in image, and as such, often as unconscious as they are visceral.”¹

There is no easy way to package this part of the story for retail. You’re coming to faith is going to be different from mine and both of ours are going to be different than Mary’s. Maybe faith isn’t just like a miracle, maybe it *is* a miracle. Maybe it is a miracle that comes, deep from within each of us, in response to the powerful pull of resurrection truth. Christ is risen! We can proclaim the truth from anywhere in the process. Whether you are currently at duty, or at curiosity, or at confusion, or in some sort of faith—wherever you are on faith’s journey, the good news of Easter is yours as well.

Smell the coffee. Proclaim the truth. Your journey is part of the story we celebrate today. Christ is risen...Christ is risen indeed!

¹ In David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), page 378.