

## Memory and Hope<sup>1</sup>

We continue today in our ponderings of Easter texts—the resurrection stories at the ends of the four gospels. Let's look today at Mary Magdalene, a disciple who is named in all four of the gospel's Easter narratives.

In John's gospel Mary comes to visit Jesus' tomb both alone and very early. Just for your curiosity, John has Mary visiting the most early—when it was still dark. John's Mary doesn't come to work with body preparation. She just comes. Then immediately upon seeing the stone rolled back, Mary dashes off to tell the other disciples that there is some problem at the grave.

At this juncture, John inserts the little episode of the Beloved Disciple and Peter running to the empty tomb. Mary is out of the picture for several verses while Peter and John explore the empty tomb and then depart. The gospel writer reports no interaction between Mary and the two men.

So, back to Mary who is crying now. I believe her weeping is due to her disappointment that Jesus' body is missing. Mary is quite focused on Jesus' corpse. In her sadness, Mary stoops and peers into the tomb. Curiously, she sees something that differs from what the male disciples saw. Mary sees angels. It's fascinating that each person's path to resurrection faith is individualized. It appears that each person needs and responds to something different. Peter saw grave cloths. Mary saw

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angels in the same places. Mary's angels are not too talkative. They merely ask, "Why are you weeping?"

Now, here's where the subtlest of details becomes quite interesting. We read that Mary turns and sees a man who, of course, is you-know-who. The detail here I've never noticed is that the word for turning is used twice, both in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> verses. Mary turns once to see the unknown man who has approached. She turns a second time in response to Jesus addressing her by name. It is almost as if John is trying to force turning into the text, because the second turning seems unnecessary. Mary turned toward Jesus once. She didn't need to turn toward him a second time. The second turning seems repetitive.

Now, I hope you're thinking that that is the most trivial detail imaginable and that it could have no possible interest to us. Why bother with it? If that's your thought, let me tell you why we need to take this repetition seriously. Turning round in the New Testament is often concept that means much more than turning. It frequently means conversion. To turn toward Jesus very often signals that a person is launching on a whole new life. He or she is embarking on a new way of life.

We pick up on this in our baptism ritual when we ask the question, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Turning here means more than something you do when you forget your car keys or take a spin on the dance floor.

So turning in the New Testament is freighted with meaning. And to catch John inserting turning into a text one time unnecessarily is to suddenly tap into a vein of gold running through this story.

Suddenly, we see something clearly about Mary. All through this episode, she keeps gravitating towards Jesus—even if it is only his dead body. Mary is first on the scene of his burial. She lingers near the tomb. Then, Mary turns to the man who approaches her from behind. Mary is the first to see and speak with the risen Jesus because she has acted to pursue him. She keeps turning to Jesus.

Now, you think, “but wait a minute, turning to Jesus or having a conversion experience is something you do at the start of your Christian life. Mary is already a Christian. She’s as Christian as anyone. Why would John slip in a suggestion that she is converting or starting fresh? Well, maybe the answer is that turning to Jesus and starting freshly is something that happens more than once. It’s something that also happens along the way.

Let’s press on. The Risen Jesus addresses Mary by name. Mary.

I was out walking in the twilight the other night and a man approached from the opposite direction. He spoke to me. “Hey, you’re that preacher from the Presbyterian church. I thought I recognized you.” He came up to me where I could see his face. He looked familiar. He said, “Do you know me?” Well, I couldn’t really put his face with an experience. Finally, he had to tell me that I had conducted his mother’s

funeral and had visited her in the hospital several times." Okay! That brought it all back. We shook hands and chatted a bit about his family.

We all have those kinds of encounters. We see something like this happening with Mary and Jesus. Jesus says, "Mary." Hmm, this stranger knows Mary. Then Mary recognizes. "Rabboni! Teacher!" When something like this happens and we re-cognize that is we know again we kind of connect with the past and bring back our joint history together.

Now, we know that Jesus died when he was crucified. But more than Jesus died. The dream of a new world order, the launching of the Christian faith, the start of the church, and a bunch of personal friendships also died with him. When Jesus came back he also brought back much of the other stuff that died along with him. Notably, we are exploring the way that the resurrection is bringing back alive the friendship and relationship between Jesus and Mary. This encounter at the grave is a big recovery of the past, the happy past when Mary and others followed Jesus as a teacher. It is turning out that that story isn't dead after all. It didn't end with Jesus' death.

I kept thinking about the corn flakes ad as I was writing this sermon. "Taste them again for the first time." There is an again-ness about this story. Mary's discipleship is on again. Her encounter and conversation with Jesus is on again.

There's also a first-timeness about this story as Mary turns to Jesus—we're back with the turning business again—as if for the first time. What does Jesus say over in Matthew. Unless you turn—there's our word—and

become like children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Or, look at the very next story after the Mary episode. In that the Risen Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee calling disciple-fishermen as if for the first time. Everybody knows that fishermen left their nets to follow Jesus. Isn't it fascinating that veteran disciples are doing that all over again. "Taste them again for the first time." Turn to him again for the first time.

Now, here's where all this leads us. Sometimes it might seem that our faith and closeness with Jesus is dead. But it's not. If you and I would keep seeking and turning to Jesus we will find him yet surprisingly alive and calling us anew—just like Mary. Mary's experience is our experience.

I listened to the personal story of a bright young guy named A. J. Stich. A. J. was an ardent fundamentalist in high school and college, earning a name for himself as really "on fire" for Christ. He was even written up in Billy Graham's magazine for organizing a crusade among his high school peers.

Then in his early 20's A.J. Stich's faith collapsed. His sense of certainty was thoroughly dislodged by the books he was reading and his own reflections. J.J. fell into a depression and lost his relationship with his girlfriend.

Happily, A. J. came into contact with post modern author, Brian McClaran and others who are trying to be Christians in the mode of some of the most progressive thinking. And A. J. has remained a Christian.

Now the story of a young man is not a grand drama, only one person's search for authenticity and God. Curiously, he calls his story, "From Faith to faith." Somehow God has preserved and recalled one young man who had pretty much fallen out of faith. I see resurrection in that—the quiet way Christ defeats death, the death of death, the death of faith, the death of enthusiasm, the death of confidence.

What I'm hearing in all of this is that no experience or disappointment in life is sufficient to ruin or end our relationship with Jesus Christ. You may be here today, "going through" the motions" of faith. Maybe your thinking just can't accept some things or contradictions or seemingly illogical aspects of the Christian faith you grew up with. Maybe you've been disappointed by the church or hurt by Christians.

The good news here is that what God has begun in your life God intends to extend and complete. Jesus Christ is risen, which means that you are risen too. He accepts you. He forgives you. He still invites you. He knows your name and will never forget you or leave you behind. Resurrection means you are his forever!