

Homily for Easter Sunday

April 12, 2020

Readings: Acts 10: 34A, 37-43; Colossians 3: 1-4; John 20: 1-9

Preacher: Cathy Kamp

As Easter approaches during these strange and perplexing times, I am meditating with a favorite icon of Mary Magdalene and our Risen Lord, a compelling depiction of John 20: 11-18. These are not our actual Easter Sunday Gospel passages. The Gospel only takes us to verse 9 of the 20th chapter of John. But I hope you will indulge me in looking a passage beyond where Peter and the other disciple did not understand. Let's look at the exchange between Mary and Jesus that happens when Mary did not take off, "but stayed outside the tomb weeping." Our mission as the Church is revealed for all time through Mary Magdalene in that encounter.

This icon depicting the encounter never fails to capture my imagination. I discovered the image while writing a Christology paper for Sister Nancy Hawkins at St. Bernard's. A few months later, my dear friends Peg and Tom Glisson, with whom I have shared RCIA and other parish ministry for many years, tracked down the iconographer, a deacon in Alaska, and acquired this inspiring work of art as a gift for my graduation. I love this image. And this year, I love it all the more because it speaks to the tension and unsettled feelings we share as COVID-19 continues to turn our worlds upside down.

In this image, Mary's world is turned upside down. Just days before, her beloved Jesus was crucified and died. She stayed at the cross long after many others. Mary fully experienced the pain and suffering of her friend's brutal, humiliating death. Now, she returns to the tomb and it's empty. She summons the other disciples, but no one fully understands. Moments later, she encounters Jesus but does not recognize him until he calls her by name.

But Mary doesn't experience a warm reunion with her Risen Lord. Jesus immediately instructs her to move on. "Stop holding on to me," he says. This icon captures that moment—that moment when Mary is both elated and feeling a bit

chastised for wanting to hold onto her beloved friend. She wants to savor this moment. She is reaching out in love and joy. Jesus, too, is reaching for her. And yet his body is angled away, his foot already in motion. He must go, and she must announce the good news to his Apostles.

The emotional tension of the moment is palpable in Scripture and in the art that depicts it. The ministry that Jesus, Mary and all the disciples shared, cannot continue as it was. There is sadness in that reality. There was sadness in his death. But now there is joy in his rising, there is joy in this newness of life. Mary wants to hold on to how things were before Jesus died; and even Jesus seems a bit ambivalent. But Jesus knows his mission; now Mary knows hers.

When we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus this Easter Sunday, can we too celebrate the tension and ambiguity of the moment? Those of us who are experiencing illness or working on the frontlines of healthcare, or who minister in the Church or work in businesses or human service agencies impacted by the coronavirus know the tension and ambiguity of the moment. Like Mary, we want so desperately to hang to what we know to be good and life-giving. But Jesus speaks to all of us when he says, “Stop holding on...”

This Easter is the dawn of a new day. Yes, we are overwhelmed by isolation and job loss and weariness and sickness and death. But we also are faced with life-giving choices. Will we hold on to the old order? Or will we surrender to the call of Jesus to embrace a new mission?

In prayer and thanksgiving for our many blessings, may we, like Mary, accept that we are missioned. Just as the meaning of Jesus being gone from the tomb was not at first clear to the disciples or Mary, may we recognize that the challenges of our time have yet to reveal the new mission that awaits us. How will we live in that tension and uncertainty? Will we pray and focus on our Risen Lord who calls us all to stop holding on to the old and to embrace the newness of life?

Dear Lord, bless us with the Easter strength and passion of your friend, St. Mary Magdalene.

Dear Lord, hold each of our loved ones, near and far, and especially your servant priests, in the palm of your hand.