

Reflection for Easter Sunday Morning

April 20, 2014

I have risen and I am with you still, alleluia! These are the words of the Entrance Anitphon for today's liturgy.

With the Easter Vigil last evening, Lent ended. The Gloria was sung, Alleluia has been restored to our prayers, bells fill the air with vibrant excitement and we are stunned by the radiance of the risen Christ. Our prayer and liturgical celebration have dramatically changed within a few hours.

In preparing for this reflection, I read an interesting account. The writer says that an attorney trying to ascertain 'just the facts' about the visit of the women to the empty tomb would have a great deal of difficulty in cross-examining witnesses. Across the four Gospel narratives, the women come either at early dawn, or very soon after sunrise, or while it was still dark. There is one, two, three or an indefinite number of women who come. They come to complete the anointing of Jesus' body that they could not finish Friday afternoon because Sabbath sunset was approaching—or they came just to see the tomb and perhaps mourn. The Greek word for "seeing" is *theoerin*, a word that carries the connotation of contemplation. In this case, the women are not bothered by anointing. They just want to be there. When the women arrive at the tomb, they are greeted by an angel, two angels, a young man, two men, or in two cases, by Jesus himself. In most cases it does not occur to the women, until they are almost at the tomb, that there is a big stone at the entrance of the tomb that they are not going to be able to move. Only the witnesses in Matthew's account actually see an angel descend from heaven to do the job for them. In all four accounts, Mary Magdalene is part of the group of women and is usually named as the leader.

So what do we know for sure? In all four Gospels, it is women who bring the news to the other disciples that the tomb is empty. The heroine who emerges in all four accounts is Mary Magdalene. Through her role in announcing the "news" to the disciples, she earns the title of the Apostle to the Apostles.

In John's Gospel for today, Mary Magdalene comes alone to the tomb. She comes while it is dark. She apparently has no concern about the stone sealing the tomb. When she arrived, she saw the stone removed and that the tomb is empty. She runs to tell Peter and John. Her message to them was: "They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don't know where they put him." All three run back to the tomb. They witness the burial cloths in the tomb. Today's Gospel ends with: they did not yet understand that He had to rise from the dead. If the Gospel would have been a little longer, the next lines would read, "With this the disciples went back home. Meanwhile Mary stayed at the tomb and wept." It is here that she encounters Jesus, not yet recognizing who he is. The person she encounters, whom she presumes is the gardener, says to her "Woman, why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for?" She confesses her confusion about what happened to the body of Jesus. Then Jesus calls her by name, and she recognizes Him. Even in this glorious reunion, she cannot linger. Jesus directs her: "Go to my brothers and tell them: "I am ascending to my Father and Your Father, to my God and Your God." Once again, Mary is off delivering the good news.

I have to say that I am disappointed with the brevity of the today's Gospel. We are left hanging with the thought that someone had carried off the body of Jesus, and also with the confusion of the two

apostles who returned home because they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.

The initial response to the resurrection is a combination of wonder, perplexity, bewilderment and unbelief. Obviously, Jesus' teaching did not end with his death. His disciples still had much to learn. We get a better sense of the importance of resurrection from the first reading from Acts of the Apostles. This reading is Peter's first sermon following Pentecost—and actually his first sermon after witnessing the resurrection. With this reading we understand the importance of resurrection for without it, Jesus' life would have been a total failure, all the more disappointing because it had so much promise. With the resurrection, every moment of Jesus' life takes on significant meaning. Following Pentecost, the disciples would continue to be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. They would recognize even more and more the power of Jesus' resurrection in their lives. In the second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians, we are directed to set our hearts on higher realms. If we take seriously this charge, from what are we asked to disengage? How can we, the Sisters, more fully embrace the challenge of our Mission/Vision Statement which calls us to cherish our intercultural and international ties; to be in right relationships with all; to courageously risk being marginalized, to live and promote non-violence and to generously share, even in the midst of scarcity. To "set our hearts on what pertains to higher realms," might actually expect all of us to look more immediately to persons of our family, community, neighborhood who are crying out for help in their loneliness or abandoned state.

To "understand the Scriptures," we must be courageous people, people of great hope, in ourselves and in each other. We need to be optimistic about what we can do together, in our country, our Church and our Community, so that when someone, like Mary Magdalene in today's Gospel, brings good news we will immediately believe. We will not be like the two disciples who ran to the tomb to check out Mary's report and still remained baffled in their unbelief. They were not ready to accept good news.

Easter, then, is the beginning of attitudes and spirits of hopes, of confidence and trust. It is our responsibility to cooperate with this wonderful grace that Jesus is offering us. Only then, can we move ahead with determination to new possibilities, as the apostles eventually did after Pentecost. We have to confront our empty tombs and discard our burial cloths. Then we can turn them into signs of hope and new life.

Jesus' resurrection proclaims the miraculous transformation of our earthly existence. Death has been conquered. We understand what was meant by what the early Fathers (and perhaps, Mothers) of the Church meant when they said: "Jesus became human so that we could become divine." We participate in the Paschal Mystery. We know and experience the cycle of life, death and new life. We know that new life is often borne in pain. We know that we can hold life and death together. Even while something within us is dying, something new can be rising. We have to give ourselves over to God and not confine God to our human limitations. Then we can truly proclaim with St. Augustine that "We are Easter people and 'Alleluia is our song.' Let us sing Alleluia here and now in this life so that we can sing it one day in the life to come."

*Sister Maria Fest
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