

“An Astounding Reversal”
Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4;
Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
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I think about that first Easter morning as the two Marys are walking down the road. It just says “the other Mary” so I don’t know a whole lot about her, but I do think about Mary Magdalene. We know just a little bit about her. It says that she was healed of seven demons and then she followed Jesus. Perhaps she was one of those who was able to support the Jesus caravan as it went across the countryside.

Perhaps as she was walking to the tomb that day, she was thinking back on what had happened to her, how she had been healed, what had changed in her life. We don’t know what kind of demons that she was healed from. What we do know is that over time people have sometimes put those demons together with what are called the seven deadly sins. I certainly know that those seven deadly sins can be demons for us. Think about what they have been defined as over time: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. All of those things are things that we can get lost in, entrapped by, enslaved by. She was thinking about how she had been healed, how in following Jesus she had been led to a new life.

But think of the grief. She had followed the man, Jesus, and he had been able to lead her into a new life. But now he was dead. What will she do?

It is in that moment that we have this incredible change. She feels the earth shake and sees the light brilliant before her, and she knows something new has happened. Had she thought of Jesus as just the man she had followed? Perhaps she knew he was the Messiah, maybe thinking of him as a new king. She was going to the tomb to grieve and perhaps to care for his body, but now what is happening? Something is changing and when change happens it’s sometimes hard to take it in. You might say the guards can’t do that. They collapse in fear.

Mary, perhaps in fear as well, drops to her knees, but what she hears is, “Do not be afraid.” It’s in that moment when she begins to see a shift taking place. I think about that idea of a shift taking place, how hard it is. Perhaps as she was thinking back, she thought how hard it was to have changed from the person she was when she met Jesus to the person she became by following Jesus. Now another shift was occurring.

There’s a story in one of C. S. Lewis’ books, *The Magician’s Nephew*. If you’ve read the books, it’s about this place called Narnia where animals talk and people enjoy a beautiful world. It’s a wonderful description of another world. This man from earth, a magician, comes to Narnia and the animals start talking to him, but he can’t understand them. It’s not because they’re not clearly talking. It’s because he doesn’t believe animals can talk. And because he doesn’t believe animals can talk, they can’t be talking. So it doesn’t matter how hard they try to communicate with him, his own perceptions won’t let it happen.

One of the things I see about the women in this moment is that they are able to keep their minds open. They are able to know that God is in their presence, that the messenger is bringing God's word, God's message to them, even if it's outside their expectations, outside their understanding. So they are told not to be afraid because when things change, when we see new things, when we come up against something we don't understand, it's frightening. So they are encouraged to not be afraid, and then to go—to go and be apostles to the apostles; that is, to go and tell them the good news that Jesus is raised.

It is in that moment that they turn and begin to go, they find that the surprises are not quite done. As they turn, Jesus is there and speaks to them. Once again, the unexpected has happened. They could say, "It's just a figment of our imaginations," and run by, but they don't do that. They are open to what is happening. They hear Jesus' word. It's kind of amazing to me, at this point, that Jesus' word is, "Greetings." That seems like a fairly normal, everyday kind of thing. It is about God coming into our everyday normal kind of life. Jesus, God incarnate, comes into our everyday life to greet us and invite us as he does these women.

They encounter God again. They again are open to what he says. And again, it's an amazing message. It reiterates what the angel has already told them: Go and tell the disciples. Now there's something interesting about having these two Marys go and tell the disciples because in that time women's voices were not always the ones that were trusted, expected to be able to tell that kind of reality.

I was talking with someone the other day and we were thinking about this together, and she said, "He's kind of doing the Jesus-y kind of thing, isn't he? Reversing things, turning things over." He's not appearing in a temple. He's not appearing at a palace. He's appearing to a couple of women at a tomb, and in that moment changing history, changing the nature of their lives, changing the possibilities.

That's what the resurrection is about, isn't it? He begins right there, as they run off to tell the disciples. It's an incredible story. So much of it is pretty common—the greeting, going to the tomb—but in the midst of it they are invited to see beyond the material aspects of the life they lead, just as Mary has been moved beyond, let's say, the seven deadly sins because that's what I can relate to. She has moved beyond those. All of those, if you think about it, are pretty material kinds of things. It's either from my internal desires or about how I care about what's going on around me. Jesus is inviting them to see God transcending all of that, to see that there is more to life, to see that there is more to who they are. They are valued by a God that loves them.

This moment is going to reverberate down through history. It starts in such a simple way. In some ways it starts with "Greetings" and it builds from there. We know, we've gone through the passion, so there's some pretty incredible struggle that has gone into this. But it's amazing that God comes back into our lives with a simple word of greeting and encouragement to not be afraid, to go do the very simplest of things.

When they encounter him, the first thing they do is worship him. I almost miss that, because I think about them turning to go. But the first thing they did when they encountered God was worship, and so worship is always the wonderful thing we can do when we encounter the incredible nature of God entering into our lives. And then they go and begin a journey that goes down across history. It reverberates its way down.

Sometimes people say, "That was then. It may have been an event that happened at that time." But I see it reverberating down through history in little ways. It's amazing. We can't always look back and see how things would have changed had it not happened. I was at Amy's thesis defense this week, and her history professor said that in about the middle of the 15th century when people were getting married, the church was saying that each of the parties, the man and the woman, should consent to the marriage for it to be a marriage. We think, yeah, that's the way it happens. But it's not the way it had happened. Parents had the choice about who the daughter got to marry. But the church was liberating the daughters to make their own choices.

We don't see all the little ways that the resurrection reverberates through history—reverberating with that phrase "Do not be afraid." Reverberating with the presence of God with us. Reverberating into our worship. Reverberating into a welcome, into a new life so that we can sing our alleluias.

We can recognize that whatever else is going on in the world around us, we have a God that says, "Greetings. Go and tell the rest." Love is alive, grace is real. Alleluia! He is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen.