

LENTEN STUDY 8 (Luke 24: 1-12)

Mary from Magdala was one of several women who followed Jesus south from Galilee to Judea without becoming an acknowledged disciple. Others named are Joanna, wife of Herod's steward, Susanna, and Mary, the mother of James the Less and Joseph. (Mark 15: 40-1, Matt. 27: 56) Some had been cured of infirmities. Mary had been ill and Jesus had rescued her. (Luke 8:2) was it a tummy ache, acne, a twitch? Because of her illness, was she an outcast, a woman with no friends, one pointed to and stared at in the street? Jesus had drawn her into his circle of friends in his new community, where people who were nothing gained infinite worth. Jesus had raised the status of women and the marginalized, and under his gaze, she had blossomed. She had learned his way, where God reigned, where all the rules that may have oppressed her were overturned, where the poor were rich and the humble exalted, where the sick found healing and the tormented found peace, where even death could be challenged. A parody of the real Mary was in the rock-opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, where she sings "I don't know how to love him," but she keeps on trying. *Superstar* did not do Mary's saucy notoriety any favours by giving her a prostitute's character. She is modern man's favourite holy Playmate. Some brides ask for this song to be played at their wedding. I feel like saying, "If you don't know how to love him (your fiasco/fiancé) you shouldn't be here."

Despite the conventional misogyny, Jesus saw women as souls who could respond to God's word. He enjoyed their company immensely. In the straight-laced Jewish society, this band of women ministered with gratitude to Jesus and his disciples as they listened to his teaching. (Luke 8:2) They soon became conscious of the revolutionary character of that teaching as it affected women then, and all women to come. Mary felt that Jesus loved her. She came to occupy a position of importance among the women. Her name is among the group on Calvary when the men disciples had slunk away. (John 19:25)

But the enemies had come for him as the powerful do so often for those who stand up to them. He had torn away with devastating words and unanswerable logic the religious superficiality which cloaked the hypocrisy of his day. Many of Jesus' friends loved him but knew too well the power of the world to cut down one such as he. Mary had watched him being killed, slowly, cruelly and before the gloating eyes of a callous crowd. Some may have hoped that he would pull some spectacular trick out of the bag and save himself. He had done so before. Now the one in whom they had placed all their hopes had gone, the man who so radically had changed their lives by his power had died a violent death, leaving behind an empty space. These had all scattered in devastated disarray. He was now trapped behind a tonne of stone. It could be said that his life story began and ended with the same symbol of rejection; the door of the inn shut against his birth and the great stone slammed across his tomb.

Late on Good/God's Friday, just before the holy Sabbath began, these women had followed Joseph of Arimathea to see where Jesus would be laid. They planned to return on Sunday, after the Sabbath rest, which no good Jew would violate. They would come to make a rendezvous with death, clutching a pathetic parcel of aromatic spices to anoint the decaying body of what seemed a proven failure. It was the last loving rite they could perform. Mary came to pay her final tribute to her special friend, but she was also entering a new stage of spiritual experience, a higher stage, a stage of devotion to a divine presence.

While it was still dark on Easter morn, the grief-stricken women returned to lavish loving tears and to pack ointments around his dead body as was customary. They came with heavy hearts and leaden feet. "While it was still dark." (John 20:1) When the bottom falls out of our life, without Easter it is dark. What if real danger threatens our loved ones? What if redundancy becomes our lot? What about a young couple told they cannot have children? What about the CEO in the prime of life cut down by stroke? What about bereavement? What about loneliness that goes on and on like a dull ache? This was where Mary of Magdala was on Easter morn "while it was still dark." The women had come, but things did not proceed according to plan. At the grave-site, they found that the huge cart-wheel door had been rolled side. It was not rolled away to let Jesus out. John tells us that in his resurrected body, Jesus could pass through material barriers. (20:19) The stone was rolled away so that others could see in and be persuaded that he was truly risen. The women had thought that they knew where to find him, but now it was a game of hide-and-seek. He had moved from the land of the dying to the land of the living. At this stage, they have no expectation of a resurrection which Jesus had alluded to. (Luke 9: 22, 44, 18: 32-3, John 11, the mind-boggling raising of Lazarus) They had come to find a dead man. In deepest mourning, they had come to pay their last respects and to ensure that he got a proper burial, so that he could rest in peace. Someone has taken the body, denying Mary a quiet goodbye. Was it the soldiers or the religious authorities or misguided disciples? Not content with killing him, were they inflicting further indignities on his dead body? Had ghoulish grave robbers broken open the grave and stolen her Lord? Mary found it easier to believe in the night-time antics of grave-robbers than the night-time antics of a God who refuses to let death have the last word.

Can you imagine opening a coffin at a funeral for a last viewing, only to find no body inside? Did he come alive again as the coffin rested in the funeral parlour and he has just slipped out in his best suit. Worse, if you found the chapel door wide open and two shining angels in white smocks nearby, it would be quite a thing.

The women are baffled and bewildered, perplexed, disoriented. He is not here as all the other buried ones seem to be. How do we react when things don't go according to plan? We didn't plan to undertake the desolate journey of physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. We didn't plan to get sick or have that accident or be laid off from work. We didn't plan on dashed promises, broken relationships, or unrealized hopes. How do we handle such change in plans? Robbie Burns wrote "the best laid plans of mice and men go awry." Stupid stuff happens. It frustrates our plans so "it's not all going to plan." Sometimes, we make mistakes, or someone else does or there is an accumulation of mistakes made over time or there could be the inheritance of an ancestor's DNA that makes things "go awry." Can we turn it all around so that despite disappointments and disasters, the final result is "a new heaven and a new earth where the former things will not come to mind?" (Isaiah 65: 17) Easter will be the celebration that everything has gone according to God's plan. This belief was long known: "I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare, and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:19)

So much has happened so fast; the arrest, the hasty trial, the rush to execution. The snatching away and killing of their vibrantly youthful friend had traumatized them; so much grief and fear in so short a time. The women's quandary is broken by the appearance of two heavenly messengers in dazzling clothes, who should not be there. Both break into the darkness of grief and despair with a searing white light of hope and joy. The angelic appearance frightens the women, but, perceiving that

heaven is visiting earth, they bow in reverence. At once, they relax the terror-tension with a mild rebuke, *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen."* That is, you are operating with stale data. He is alive, so do not look for him in a tomb. What you are looking for cannot be found where you are looking. God, in the person of Jesus, has faced death frankly and has outstared it with the power of his love. Resurrection is God's protest against the finality of death and God has the last laugh. Luke wrote *"this man...you crucified and killed...but God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power."* (AA 2:23-24) A glorious impossibility! For many today, life is a hopeless, meaningless struggle and death is the final, inevitable word. They can see no purpose in or beyond this world, and so abandon themselves to the passing pleasures of the moment. But death has been vanquished. Christ has conquered it. The death of Jesus was the death of death.

It is amazing that God chose to announce this to two women who are considered unimportant in their culture. Easter says everything does not end with a hole in the ground or behind the crematorium veil. Easter means that life cannot be meaningless after all; the sacrifice you made which no one noticed, let alone appreciated, is not wasted, the setback you suffered, the letdown that nearly broke your heart, that incapacitating illness which struck you down, none of this has been useless nor pointless, but has truly meant something, "for all things work together to the good to them that love the Lord."

Do we look for Jesus in dead things? Do we look for a full and abundant life in the wrong place? What makes you think if you get the promotion, you'll find real security? Why are you trying to find happiness in buying the red Maserati? Why do you think recognition and an award of AO is the key to the self-esteem you long for? Do you think that once you are successful, you'll really be able to enjoy life? Do we seek happiness in an insatiable appetite for entertainment, yet we attend a symphony concert and spend time twitting and texting? Do we choose a foretaste of death while we live by harbouring grudges, nursing and rehearsing hurts done us and planning insane payback, refusing to get better by staying bitter? These may give a temporary fix at best; they may be captivating but short-lived; they are not the source of abundant life and we come away unfulfilled, empty-handed. Was it Peggy Lee who used sing "Is that all there is, my friend? Then, let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball if that's all there is." Why do you seek the living among the dead? We will only find Jesus where there is resurrection life. "I am the resurrection and the life. Who believes in me will live." (John 11:25-6) "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

The messengers continued, "Remember how he told you. The Son of Man must be handed over, be crucified and rise again." (Luke 9:22) *Must* is the critical word, just as the crucifixion was a *must* as was the resurrection. God, the cosmic director, has orchestrated this; it is all of God's design; you should not be surprized. Why have you brought spices to preserve Jesus' body? He is in good shape again for God has been in control all along. He had been dead. Hope and new life had not been on the women's radar. The news that he was alive meant far more than to say he was a survivor of the crucifixion ordeal. The first notes of hope stirred in their hearts; his words began to change their sadness into joy. They had made their plans without remembering his words. How often do we do the same? Do we remember his words when unexpected, unimaginable sorrow has intruded into our joy, when our eyes are blinded by tears, when perhaps we have stood forlornly in a graveyard having laid the body of a loved one to rest? This is precisely where the resurrection was first

announced where death thought it reigned supreme. Our dead are not dead, but alive to live a more beautiful life than ours. When the loss of self-esteem or friendship or health seems to cut us off from any possibility of a good future, then we need to remember Jesus' predictions of his passion, his words about new life that would rise from pain and death (like eucalypts after bushfire,) and remember the Easter Gospel where prediction becomes proclamation.

Mark ends his account by putting women down with "Go, tell his disciples and Peter...they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and *they said nothing to anyone.*" (16: 7-8) Bunnies to that! When we are in a state of bewildered apprehension, when we are in a situation that radically disrupts our plans and expectations, naturally we can feel fear; we may even die a little death. The women have already outstripped the hiding men in faith and courage and resolution as a pitiful little knot of encouragers on Calvary. In Luke, the women cannot keep the good news to themselves. Excitedly, they told the astonishing news to the traumatized and sceptical disciples. John's account has Jesus say "Go to my brothers and say to them 'I am ascending to my Father.'" For Mary, there was no returning to a mere domestic role; she had been commissioned to spread the news, "I have seen the Lord." (John 20:16) Chrysostom called Mary 'the apostle to the apostles' authorized by Risen Jesus. Now, the women were convinced that the tomb could never be Jesus' fixed abode, but not the men. Their good news does not make a flicker on the male Richter-excitement-Scale, yet all Christian preaching will begin here. All Christian sermons are reverberations of the Easter Good News first announced by women to the disciples. But in a typical male response, they are sceptical about resurrection and regard the women's revolutionary announcement as hysterical female nonsense, "an idle tale." (Luke 24:11) Alas, this phrase was used to describe the delirious stories told by the insane and not worthy of consideration. The women are dreaming in bereaved delirium. This is an early derogatory "chick flick" syndrome. The women are disappointed, deflated, let down, by the male response. All the air has gone from their excited balloon. The men dismiss the testimony according to the Mishnah teaching "From women, let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex." John depicts Mary weeping inconsolably in the black storm of numbing bereavement outside the tomb.(20:11) The wonderful adventure of travelling with Jesus has come to an end. She had been plunged into a terrifying black hole of dark despair at her Jesus being struck down in his prime and tortured to death. She may have wept fast flowing tears at the possible ultimate insult: someone may have taken the body for foul mutilation. But she also wept because she was *so frustrated* at not galvanizing the men from their lethargy. She is the patron saint of those who have stood at graves and wept. Despite the mean men's mind-set, Mary concluded that the new world of God's reign was too precious to lose. She returned to the tomb. In Luke's Gospel, there is no voice calling her by name as in John. (20:15) She came back because she was certain that death could not defeat her Jesus; had he not shown he was stronger than death? Later in Acts, Mary is among the women and disciples who await the coming of the Holy Spirit Comforter on the day of Pentecost: "The disciples dwelt in the upper room together with Mary of Magdala, Mary, the mother of Jesus and the rest of the women." (AA 1:14) Mary who once possessed seven demons would receive the seven-fold Spirit. Then, however, Mary of Magdala disappears from the Gospel into silence. It was Mary, the Mother of Jesus who would be coveted by the Early Church, and would brook no rivals to her rise. But, Mary of Magdala knows, in the midst of grief, Risen Jesus came to her first and called her by name. The voice that had once called her into his family, called her again. It was Jesus, the man she had lost, lost she thought for ever and a woman's name, tenderly spoken, is the first recorded word of the risen Christ.

At the women's news, Peter, the stumbling saint, begins to trust what Jesus had predicted, and cannot sit still upon hearing the report. Despite his momentary weakness in denial and his disastrous crash into cowardice when he had infiltrated into the very hotbed of hostility, his moral strength and stature as a born leader is there. Perhaps he thought to visit the burial place might soothe his sorely scared soul; perhaps he thought that with his mind tugged this way and that with shame, to be up and doing was preferable to brooding. So Peter and John hurried to the tomb. He saw the grave cloths left behind, and is amazed, which is not yet faith. Then both *went home without telling anyone!!* (John 20:10, Luke 24:12) John saw and believed; Peter merely marvelled. Peter was still too broken, too numb in mind to see anything but failure. Risen Jesus will seek him out alone. Paul wrote "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve." (Twelve? 1 Cor.15:4-6) The risen Lord's first work was to restore the broken-hearted and regain him his ministry. John, the disciple closest to Jesus in love is the one male who is first to believe. John's is a love that sees through the dark. Do beloved disciples always get first to the heart of the matter? For the heart of the Resurrection is love. Only slowly and grudgingly and methodically did the men come to believe what had happened. They could see that he was spectacularly risen, but did not understand how. In John (20: 5-7), saw the fine linen burial cloths, provided by Joseph of Arimathea, lying in perfect order like a chrysalis from which a living organism has come out. The cloths were left behind because they were for the dead. But they seemed to say to them, "I may be out of sight, but I'll be right back." The conclusion should have been that, had the body been stolen, the wrappings would have been taken too. They had not been ripped off in search of booty. The Gospels do not ground our faith in empty tombs or discarded burial cloths. Gospel faith on the Resurrection is built on the presence and witness of the risen Lord in human experience, in women and men who have received God's gift of faith, and have it nourished in the community of believers.

The disciples had suffered from a narrow-minded faith. Disciples such as Judas and Simon the Zealot had hoped that Jesus would carry out their plans to overthrow the establishment and institute political and social reform. They had hoped that Jesus would be king to lower taxes, improve national security and bring a return to the good old days of economic prosperity and international respect. But he was rejected and killed. The dream they had hoped was punctured; all their high hopes and noble goals were shattered. Easter is the celebration that even when things don't go according to our plan, still everything has gone according to God's plan, because God stepped into our world with a true plan. Now, no matter what may threaten us in this life, sickness, trials, troubles, accidents, tragedy, unemployment, stupidity, we must believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus because of Easter.

Resurrection is God's defiant answer to a world that hoped violence would keep Jesus in its permanent hold. Jesus suffered a violent death and was buried. But perfect love cannot let him rest in peace. Jesus, being raised, proved every value that Jesus stood for, every story Jesus ever told, every preference Jesus ever made, every purpose Jesus ever followed. All this was given new life and new significance. *Without* the resurrection, Jesus would be reduced to a curiosity, a forgettable footnote in a crowded history of lost causes. Without Easter the story of Jesus would have feeble flame flickered and gone out. Darkness and Jerusalem did not have the last word; God had the last and the first in Jesus' life. In the words of Philippians 2, Jesus emptied himself to be in-filled with energising love, which burst from the tomb as no tomb could hold such love-life power. This process cannot be confined to him, but God's graciousness is extended to all who follow the Risen Son's way. Paul says

“When Christ is revealed, and he is your life, you too will be revealed in all your glory with him.” We must choose to let some of the glory shine through our halting efforts to follow the Lord’s example. Then, our death will not be the final word.

It is cheekily claimed that more people have seen Elvis since his death than those who saw Jesus after the resurrection. The Elvis watchers get their few minutes fame. Rightly, no one takes them seriously. The focus of the earliest witnesses to the resurrection was on Christ, and bearing public witness to what they saw or believed could lead to death. Within a generation after Jesus’ death, people all over the Mediterranean world, who had never seen Jesus alive, reported that they had encountered his risen presence, and were prepared to put their lives on the line for this person. In our contemporary world, we, too, may have to pay a price for how we live and how we challenge. But we have each other, we have the heroic example of saints and martyrs, and we have him who conquered death by being raised, who has opened the way to eternal life for us. May the Easter light shine on us this day and chase the shadows of the night of death away. Alleluia. Amen.