

Morning Star

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not

hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In *Sophie's Choice*, the epic 1979 novel by William Styron, Stingo, the book's protagonist, confronts the evils of the Holocaust. As a Southerner, Stingo also, albeit reluctantly, comes to terms with the legacy and evil of slavery, and he does both by means of his baroque and complicated friendship with Nathan and the lovely Sophie, a Holocaust survivor. At the book's conclusion, having stared into the face of evil, what Styron calls the "black edifice of Auschwitz," Stingo awakens out of a drunken stupor on the beach at Coney Island. "It was then," the protagonist writes, "that in my mind I inscribed the words: *'Neath cold sand I dreamed of death / but woke at dawn to see / in glory, the bright, the morning star.'*"

And then Styron adds the final line. "This was not judgment day – only morning. Morning: excellent and fair."

Mary Magdalene had a restless night. The past couple of days had been a nightmare – the betrayal and the sham trial, the jeering crowd and then the lonely, excruciating walk up to Golgotha, the infamous "place of the skull." At noon on Friday, judgment day, this peaceful man, the only man who had ever loved Mary without condition, heaved his final breath. Judgment day.

Mary didn't sleep well that night, and the following day had been a blur. She wandered the streets aimlessly, trying to take it all in, trying to comprehend what had happened, the injustice of it all. Mary Magdalene had a special relationship with Jesus. This gentle man from Nazareth seemed to

understand her, and he defended her, time after time, despite her tawdry past and her questionable associations.

And the new ethic that he taught, the ethic of love, was hardly the stuff of a rebel, and yet it was revolutionary in its own way – so revolutionary that it represented a threat to the established order and those self-anointed guardians of the law. They sought – and won – the collusion of the Roman government and put him to death.

All of this was spinning in Mary's mind throughout the night. She slept fitfully, if at all, and when she did sleep she dreamed of death – terrible, ugly death. She woke early on that first day of the week, downed a couple cups of coffee, and headed out into the pre-dawn morning. Judgment day. She had no reason to think otherwise. They had taken away the man she loved and nailed him to a wooden tower, the kind of ignominious death reserved for thieves and insurrectionists. Evil had triumphed on that terrible Friday. Mary clutched the shawl tightly around her shoulders against the morning chill.

We too have seen evil, even in our lifetime. The Holocaust. Slavery. The slamming of passenger jets, gorged with fuel, into office towers. We emerged only recently from what historians almost certainly will reckon as the genocidal century. The massacre of Armenians. The killing fields of Khmer Rouge. Bosnia. The ovens at Dachau. Idi Amin. Rwanda. And the present century looks no better. Darfur. Abu Ghraib. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

We have stared into the face of evil, just as Mary on that morning had witnessed the apparent triumph of evil.

But Easter Sunday reminds us that death is not the end of the story, that evil will not prevail. In the midst of the horrors of the twentieth century, we also witnessed the lives and the extraordinary work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and countless,

nameless others who bore silent witness to goodness and justice, who chose to light a candle rather than curse the darkness – and who, whether they acknowledged it or not, affirmed the hope of Easter morning.

But in the moment, it's easy to lose sight of hope in the face of despair. So as we trace Mary Magdalene's steps from her modest apartment, through the streets of Jerusalem, and toward the garden tomb, we share her anguish, her desolation, her loss. Judgment day.

Because we know so well the rest of the story, how it all turns out, we sometimes miss the confusion Mary felt when she came upon the empty tomb. We view this as unalloyed triumph, sure evidence that Jesus had conquered death. But that was not Mary's initial perception. Her sorrow at the death of Jesus was compounded by the realization that someone had stolen the body of the crucified one.

Mary turned and ran – in anguish, in disbelief – and she encountered John and Simon Peter, who had similar ideas about visiting the tomb early that morning. The Gospel says that the men looked inside the tomb and then returned home; the account says nothing of their disposition.

But Mary stayed, just as she had lingered at Golgotha to the bitter end. And the Gospel records that she wept upon seeing the empty tomb. This worn and ragged woman, defiled and reviled, an outcast. Mary had been present throughout the passion, watching the ghastly death, preparing the body for burial. She wept – long, womanly sobs of grief. She wept for him and for herself and for the lost promise of this gentle man from Galilee. Judgment day, indeed.

And then, just about then as the sun bleached the horizon, she saw the gardener. “Woman, why are you weeping?” he asked. “Whom are you looking for?” Mary demanded to know who had taken the body and where it was.

Jesus, the man who was *not* the gardener, simply speaks her name – “Mary” – and nothing, from that day to this, has ever been the same. “Mary.”

I love the fact that it was Mary Magdalene who first discovered the empty tomb and who recognized the risen Lord. Mary the woman of questionable repute, the one Jesus defended time after time against her accusers and her detractors. Perhaps it is those of us who understand our weaknesses, our shortcomings, who can most readily recognize the Man of Sorrows. Mary understood something about suffering and evil and injustice. She had witnessed the crucifixion and the ghastly death. But it was also Mary who recognized the Resurrection.

‘Neath cold sand I dreamed of death / but woke at dawn to see / in glory, the bright, the morning star.’

No, “This was not judgment day – only morning. Morning: excellent and fair.”

Easter Sunday

April 24, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut