

Easter Vigil

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Introduction

From the darkness of Holy Saturday, we enter the first light of Easter morning with Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome. However, it is not a scene of unbridled joy and wonder but one of utter fear. They arrive at the tomb talking together about the practicalities of the task ahead of them but they leave in silence. They come prepared with spices to anoint the dead body of the one they believed was here to save them but they leave unprepared for what will come next. The sun may have begun to rise in the sky but they were still to be found in the darkness of grief and from there were flung into the confusion of fear. This is a story of reality which conflicts with expectation.

In the midst of this, these women are true to their emotions and their experience is authentic. As you read the passage, become aware of the emotions you sense in them and in yourself.

Text

Mark 16:1-18

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Comment

Very early on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb so that they could do what women were expected to do. They got scared and they ran away, never to tell the story. We have to wait for the men to arrive in another Gospel before the good news of the resurrection of Jesus could be shared with many. I sat with this text for ages before I realised that this incredibly prejudiced view of Mark's account of Easter morning was one I had actually adopted. It makes me ashamed to admit this as a woman. Acknowledging and naming this prejudice has allowed me to read this story from a fresh point of view. They were not weak and pathetic, as they are sometimes portrayed. Now I state with confidence that Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome were strong and courageous women with whom I identify deeply. They were willing to do their duty, to ask for help and to experience the authenticity of their feelings.

Whilst it may have been the common practice of the time for the women to prepare the body after death, let's not shy away from the horror of what they had to face. Jesus had been beaten, whipped and had a crown of thorns forced down on his head. He had hung on the cross for hours, bleeding and in agony. He may have developed sepsis where the thorns or the nails had pierced his skin. It is likely that asphyxiation claimed his last breath. There was no time to anoint his body before the Sabbath and so days after he had died, the women went to the tomb to anoint a body that was already in the first stages of decay. To me, that is brave and it shows the sheer strength of character of each of these women and the love they had for Jesus.

As they arrived at the tomb, they were talking and discussing who would move away the stone for them. With my prejudiced mind, I found myself wondering why they couldn't do it themselves – there were three of them after all. I'm pretty sure I would have rolled my sleeves up and given it my best shot before seeking help. I realised that I had jumped to the conclusion that they were seeking a man to do the heavy lifting for them. Perhaps this was the case. Then again, there might have been an especially strong woman in the village. Regardless of who they may have had in mind, it seems that they were willing to ask for help. It takes a strong person to acknowledge that they can't do everything alone and to lean upon others.

However, for me, the greatest show of strength in this passage is the women's refusal to allow someone else to tell them how to feel. The young man said to them, 'Do not be alarmed,' just as angels throughout our Scriptures have told many, 'Do not be afraid.' The women weren't alarmed, they were terrified. What on earth was going on? In my eagerness to hear the words of the young man proclaiming that Jesus had risen, I had always completely ignored Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome. They had built themselves up to do a horrible job and they went together to support one another. When they got there, they realised that they were not fully prepared, and after all that, a stranger was sitting in the tomb telling them not to be frightened. Are you kidding me? Of course they were scared out of their wits!

Did that young man honestly think that his words would have the desired effect? Have you ever received a phone call that began with the words, 'Don't worry but...'? What was your immediate response? I think it's likely that that was the moment you began to worry.

In the pit of grief and despair, these three brave women went to the tomb and what they found there scared them. Despite the young man's instruction, they owned their feelings in that moment and beyond and I've got to say – I love them for it. They show us that our emotions cannot simply be switched off. We cannot easily detach ourselves from them. They allowed themselves to experience fear and to act upon it, choosing to keep the young man's words to themselves.

Through mental health issues, toxic relationships and spiritual turmoil, no-one has the right to dictate how we feel. If we acknowledge our emotions, like our prejudices, we can explore where they have come from and how we choose to respond to them. They are part of our authentic experience and we should not dismiss them. It is important to recognise when we need to speak about our feelings with others to help us process them. If you need to speak to someone, please refer to the section 'Looking for pastoral support' on this website.

Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome were sad, grieving, hurt, disappointed and then very fearful. They didn't pretend, they didn't cover it up and it did not make them weak. They lived out a real experience, like the strong, courageous females they were and in so doing, they encourage us to reconnect with our true emotions.

Response

- Look at the range of emojis available on your mobile phone or tablet. Can you pick out one that shows how you are feeling today? If one does not describe it fully, how many would you choose?
- Read Psalm 22. In response, compose your own psalm to express the emotions you are experiencing.
- Paint the way you feel, using oils, pastels, watercolours, poster paint or even water. Let the brush strokes become the unutterable words of your heart.

Prayer

We give thanks, Lord, for Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome and for their ministry to us showing us the importance of acknowledging how we feel even as others try to dictate our emotions. Help us to have authentic experiences and responses as wonderful individuals created by you. Grant us the sensitivity and patience to listen to the feelings of others, especially when they differ from our own.

Amen.