

Easter Day

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Introduction

Today's Gospel passage is set at a critical moment of change for those who have been Jesus' close companions. Their momentum and direction of travel are about to be dramatically altered in ways they don't yet realise. It can sometimes be difficult to read a familiar and beloved Easter passage from outside the perspectives and emotions of Easter morning. However, John's account of Mary's encounter with the risen Christ has various resonances and details which can help us as we try to develop better understandings of, and ways of dealing with, the conflicts in our lives.

Preparation:

As you read the passage, imagine presenting it as a drama: how would you divide it up into different scenes? What do you see as the key moments or defining emotions of each of these? You could perhaps try to pictorially represent the different lines of 'travel' – emotionally or in understanding – of each of the key characters.

Alternatively, read the passage and make a note of any phrases or verses which remind you of other episodes or passages in John's Gospel (or elsewhere in the Bible). Do these resonances give you any different sight-lines into the text?

Text

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.

Comment

In contrast to the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels, John's resurrection story begins not as day is dawning but while it is 'still dark'. This is perhaps not totally unexpected – darkness is, after all, one of the *leitmotifs* of his gospel – but there is another resonance here, one that takes us back to its opening chapter. John's gospel begins not with Jesus' birth narrative, but with the birth narrative of creation itself: the Word speaks, and out of darkness and chaos, order, form and purpose start to emerge – time begins. We are in a very similar scenario here: there is darkness and chaos for Mary and the other disciples, but the Word is about to speak. New form, order and purpose will start to become apparent; time will begin again in a new way. *The momentum shifts...*

This change in narrative is accompanied by another change – something which the disciples will be slow to grasp at first, and which will only be properly realised at Pentecost. Once again there is a parallel with the opening chapter of John's story, this time one which centres on the words of Jesus in verse 15. His question to Mary “*tis z te*” – “whom are you looking for?” – is exactly the same question which he asks of Andrew in 1:26*, and which starts the journey leading to this moment. However, there is a critical difference: whereas the question to Andrew and his companion is followed by an invitation to ‘come and see’, here the follow-up is an instruction to Mary to ‘go and tell’.

Up until this point, the force in the story has drawn Mary and the disciples *in towards* Jesus – they have left their homes and occupations to move around with him, sharing in every aspect of his embodied life. Now though, the direction of the force is changed: rather than being drawn in by his physical presence, they will be *impelled out* by his resurrection presence. The centripetal pull of ‘come to’ is replaced by the centrifugal impetus of ‘go out’ – resurrection energy will help them to keep moving forward against competing forces which will try to change their new course. *The direction of travel alters ...*

But alongside these indications of a dramatic and substantial change, John also – through some of the details in this story – says important things about the past which will now be left in its wake. Firstly, there is the reference to the linen cloths which had covered Jesus' body in the tomb. In the space of a few sentences (v.5-7) these grave clothes are referenced three times (including with an indication that their individual distinctiveness remains) so their continuing presence at the scene of the resurrection is clearly significant. The resurrection does not ‘undo’ or obliterate the suffering of Jesus – that happened and will always have happened (as the wounds which Jesus will later show to his disciples will underline). Similarly, it does not ‘unmake’ the death of Jesus – that too happened and will always have happened, as the grave clothes testify. The disciples' new momentum and changed direction do not ignore, deny or modify the preceding history.

The new state of affairs also involves recognising and acknowledging the reality of the emotions associated with this history. Once again the point is made through a repeated reference, this time relating to Mary's behaviour: four times in quick succession we are told that she is weeping. This is no quiet and discreet shedding of tears however. Mary is wailing: the Greek word *klai* refers to a loud and visible expression of grief, particularly as seen in mourning for the dead.** In contrast to the inattentiveness of the disciples (at least as presented in this record) both Jesus and the angels in the tomb recognise and openly acknowledge Mary's grief, and Jesus responds to it by speaking her name in a way which she instantly recognises. We can infer from Jesus' next comment that she embraces him, and it could well be that her grieving behaviour is also included in his instruction that she should not *continue* holding on to him (the verb is given in the present tense imperative indicating an ongoing action).

Mary's grief is thus neither ignored nor dismissed out of hand – her emotions are noted, honoured and responded to (something we see in other resurrection encounters as well). Just as the resurrection does not unmake the crucifixion and the history which led to it, neither does it negate the validity of the emotions associated with those events, nor the appropriateness of their expression. However, they cannot continue to be the directing force of behaviour at this moment of change – like the grave clothes, they must be left lying if the disciples are to fully inhabit their new post-resurrection world.

Footnotes

*although in 1:26 it is sometimes translated 'what are you looking for?' the Greek is identical.

** W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol IV, p. 206.

Response

While they might not always be so definitive or dramatic as this one, we too may well encounter critical moments in conflict situations when the momentum and direction of travel shift – and we need to be able to take advantage of these. This story highlights two of the things that can make it difficult for us either to 'escape' from a particular line of travel and take up a new one, or to continue on a new narrative path or course of action and not be drawn back towards the old one.

Firstly, there is the question of how we deal with the history of what has happened. As various different 'Truth and Reconciliation/Justice' Commissions have shown, doing this at the level of community, national or international narratives is a complex affair requiring huge commitments and resources and is a collective responsibility. How we choose to deal with our own history though – especially when we have come to different understandings about a situation – *is* our responsibility and within our own power to address. We may well be deeply embarrassed about opinions or positions we have formerly held, things we have said, or ways we have behaved, and wish them undone or buried out of sight. The danger here is that effort and emotional energy which could be used in moving forward is instead diverted into trying to erase, alter or hide this jarring history – sometimes as much from ourselves as from others.

Secondly, there is the issue of how we handle potent emotions that are rooted in past events, especially given the way in which emotional responses can exert a very strong influence on thought and behaviour. Once again though this is not a question of trying to deny the existence or even, necessarily, the validity of an emotion – Mary's grief is an entirely understandable and legitimate response. Rather it is about trying to be more consciously aware of the extent to which such emotions might be helping or (especially if unchecked) hindering our ability to move forwards in constructive ways; and if necessary, of finding people to help us with the sometimes difficult task of working through the latter.

- Have you ever been in a conflict situation where you have tried to re-write or re-frame how you have thought, spoken or acted? Why did you feel it was necessary to this? Was the outcome successful or otherwise? With

hindsight, what other ways might there have been of managing this discordant history?

- Can you recall a time when a conflict situation provoked a strong emotional reaction (positive or negative). To what extent did this determine your subsequent behaviour? How can we develop a practice which allows us to experience and own the inevitable (and perfectly natural) emotional responses which we have at certain moments but prevents these from dictating our subsequent reactions and actions in ways which may be unhelpful or destructive? What tools or skills might help us with this?
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Prayer

Jesus,
when we stand
fearful and hesitant
at a threshold of change,
steady us with your presence
then speak our name
and call us onwards
into new possibilities.
Amen