

Who Are You Looking For?

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Mary Magdalene stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him."

As soon as she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (Teacher).

Jesus said, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her. (John 20:11–18, CEB)

Grace, peace, and mercy to you from God the Holy One, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit on this gorgeous Easter morning.

Before moving here to the holy land of Downeast Maine in 1997, I was in North Carolina for twenty years. I lived and worked in the Asheville area for thirteen years, followed by seven years in graduate school in Greensboro.

One thing I absolutely loved about both Asheville and Greensboro—and this is true of North Carolina in general—was the abundance of live theatre. There's something magical about sitting in a darkened theatre and watching a play acted out on a stage. In my fantasy world, which includes aspects of both Maine and North Carolina, I attend a play almost every night.

Good playwrights are masters of both an art and a craft, and many an excellent poet or novelist has tried and failed miserably at writing plays. In a well written play, the story

line is active and sufficiently linear that the audience doesn't get lost. It's told through an intricate interweaving of spoken lines, facial expressions, body language, costumes, and sets. And it is imbued with barely discernable meaning, some truth or truths that the audience comes to understand just enough to raise questions in their minds about how the play might relate to their own lives.

On the first Easter morning, almost two thousand years ago, humankind was treated to a drama—a really poorly written play, certainly by 21st-century standards—about the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Easter morning has all the elements necessary for a masterful work of live theatre. The setting is a tomb, with both exterior and interior scenes, and a really large stone. The costumes have lots of potential—angels dressed in dazzling white robes, the linen wrappings and face cloth in which Jesus's body was wrapped, and even apparently the typical clothing of a first-century gardener. More on that later.

And just imagine what 21st-century live theatre could do, given our amazing theatrical equipment and technology, with the image of a crucified Jesus literally rising from the dead. Can't you just imagine this show on Broadway, perhaps as an Andrew Lloyd Weber musical?

Instead, we have four different, somewhat contradictory, versions of what happened on that early Sunday morning, none of which completely satisfy our questions or—let's be honest—our scepticism about what really happened. For example, how many women actually went to the tomb? Mary Magdalene is the only one who appears in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name some combination of Mary the mother of James, Joanna, Salome, and “the other women.” In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene is the only woman at the tomb on Sunday morning.

Another difference is that John's gospel is the only one in which the angels don't reprimand the women for not remembering that Jesus had told them that the grave could not and would not hold him. In Matthew, the angel says, “He has been raised, as he said.” Luke has the angel saying, “Remember how he told you . . . that on the third day he would rise again?” Even Mark has the angel telling the women that they'll see Jesus in Galilee “just as he told you.” Not so in John, where we have a kinder, gentler angel who is more concerned with comforting the distraught Mary Magdalene than shaking an angelic finger in her face and chiding her for an inconvenient memory lapse.

And honestly, if I had gone through what Mary Magdalene had endured over the previous couple of days, I'd have a hard time remembering my own name. She's confused and upset, probably sleep deprived, and she just can't understand what she's seeing. Not only has her beloved teacher been murdered on a Roman cross, but now his body has—she thinks—been stolen, and she is weeping in despair and sorrow. Not a good time to be fussed at by an angel.

I love John's version of Easter morning because it humanizes Mary Magdalene and treats her with the understanding and respect that she deserves. Early in Jesus's ministry, he had cleansed her of seven demons, which probably meant that he cured her of some physical and/or mental disorder. Over the centuries, the patriarchal leadership of the Christian church has tried to portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, but there is absolutely no historical evidence of that. In fact, she was more likely a well-respected woman of some financial means. The Bible tells us that she helped to support Jesus and his apostles as they traveled around Galilee.

John's gospel tells us that she stood by the cross during Jesus's crucifixion, near his mother, and she is most well known for being the first person to see the resurrected Christ. It's also worth mentioning, I think, that John's gospel is the only version of the Easter story in which Mary Magdalene is not "afraid," "terrified," or "alarmed," as the women in the other three gospels are described. She's sad and confused, it's true, but not afraid.

In many ways, John's version of Easter morning belongs to Mary. Peter and the disciple mentioned in the first part of the story, in verses 1–10, didn't see the angels or the risen Jesus. They saw only a vacant tomb and two piles of clothes—emptiness and absence—and then they left and went home in confusion.

But Mary looked into that same tomb and saw two angels dressed in white, and one of them asked her, "Why are you crying?" She answered, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." Then she turned around, and there stood a man who she thought was the gardener, perhaps because of how he was dressed. Or maybe because in her confusion, she simply couldn't think of anyone else he possibly could have been.

By the way, Barbara Brown Taylor, in writing about Easter morning, humorously wonders whether there actually was a gardener wandering around naked, having given

his clothes to Jesus. The reference to the gardener in verse 15 takes me back to my earlier argument that the story of Easter morning could have been, but isn't, a well-written play. Is some unnamed man weeding flowers, trimming hedges, and raking leaves around Jesus's tomb on Easter morning?

John's mention of a gardener is so unusual that it seems to us like foreshadowing, and we naturally expect to see him appear at some later point in the story. This is a literary technique known as "Chekhov's gun." The playwright Anton Chekhov famously said that if there is a rifle onstage in the first act, it absolutely must go off in the second or third act. Otherwise it has no business being present. The gardener, who is never again mentioned, is a bit of failed literary technique of which Chekhov would *not* have approved.

At any rate, Taylor goes on to say that any way you look at it, the story of Easter morning "is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted almost 2000 years now, and yet *that* is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on *that* tomb, on *that* morning, on what did or did *not* happen there."

John Dominic Crossan, a highly respected New Testament scholar, says that the actual resurrection of Jesus is the only significant act of Holy Week that we don't see. We are with Jesus throughout his ministry, but not at his resurrection. Obviously there were moments, such as when Jesus was praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday evening just prior to his arrest, when there were no witnesses to what he did or said. And yet all four gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—felt sufficiently confident about what happened at such times to give us, if not the facts, at least the truth of what happened.

As Barbara Brown Taylor explains, the resurrection was "the one and only event in Jesus's life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there." Last month I took an online class with John Dominic Crossan, in which I learned that there weren't even any artistic representations—paintings or sculptures—of the resurrection until more than a thousand years after Jesus's death. Nobody knew how to visually depict something that they simply couldn't imagine.

In my experience, the two specific things about the story of Jesus that people are most often flummoxed by are the "virgin" Mary and the "resurrected" Jesus. Both of those

things are in direct conflict with our experience of how life works. They fall outside the parameters of what we understand to be possible with regard to human life. I freely admit that in an intellectual sense, I struggle with the fact of resurrection—and yet I embrace the truth that in my own life, I have been pulled back from the brink and resurrected several times. And I find it easy to believe that somehow, in a way that I am not capable of intellectually understanding, Jesus was indeed resurrected on that Easter morning two thousand years ago. I'm not exactly sure what I mean when I say those words, but I believe them to be true.

I also believe that one of the most important questions that we can ask ourselves, as Christians, is the same question that Jesus asks of Mary Magdalene. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus appears to Mary, his first words are “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” At first she doesn't recognize Jesus. “Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.’” Clearly she was looking for Jesus, and she found him.

Who are *you* looking for?

Are you looking for a Jesus who will greet you on Sunday morning at 10:00 and wave goodbye at 11:00? “Thanks for coming, Cindy. Have a good week. Maybe I'll see you next Sunday.” Are you looking for a Jesus who won't interfere in what you say and do when you're at work, at home, grocery shopping, talking with friends? A Jesus with whom you don't feel any need to have an actual relationship and get to know better? Because if that's the Jesus you're looking for, that's the Jesus you'll find.

Or are you looking for a Jesus who will, as Nadia Bolz Weber says, drag you out of your *own* tomb? A Jesus who will never stop gently pushing and prodding you, reminding you that your neighbors are in need, telling you over and over again that you are worthy of love. Are you looking for a Jesus who knows how to comfort you in your darkest moments and reassure you that you, too, are holy and sacred? Because if that's the Jesus you're looking for, that's the Jesus you'll find.

What Jesus are we all—this church, as a body of Christ—looking for? Are we actively searching for the Jesus who will, if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, lead us into the future and reveal to us, bit by bit, the work that he wants us to do, no matter what? Are we looking for the Jesus who will whisper in our ears, “I am with you,” as he gently

pushes us out into a world in which the Christian church is changing before our very eyes?

Or are we looking for a Jesus who will lead us back to the way things used to be, the way things have always been? A Jesus who will stand in the dreaded breach between Centre Street Church and change? Well, if that's the Jesus we're looking for, then we're in trouble, my friends, because that's not the Jesus who walked out of that tomb on Easter morning.

Easter isn't about a spectacular miracle, forgiveness for sins, or the promise of life after death. Easter is about transformation and new life, as made manifest in the Son of God walking again among us, his followers. Easter is about continuing to move forward, steadily and surely, supported and encouraged by the Sacred and Divine, into a different kind of church in a different kind of world, a better world for all people.

On Easter morning, just outside the city of Jerusalem, Jesus Christ emerged from his tomb and asked Mary Magdalene, "Who are you looking for?" Two thousand years later, on this Easter morning, he's asking us the same question.

How do we answer?