

“The Courage to Weep”  
March 23, 2008

John 21:1-18  
Acts 10:34-43

One of the marvelous ways of praying with the Bible is called “lectio divina,” which is Latin for “holy reading.” As it’s usually described, lectio divina has four or five stages, all of which have Latin names I have trouble remembering. But even though I can’t always remember its name, I do remember which stage is my favorite, and that’s the time during which, if you’re praying in this way, you imagine that you’re in the Biblical scene that you’re reading. You imagine being an observer or a participant, and, in your imaginings, you notice sights, sounds, feelings, and more.

This stage of lectio divina urges us to embrace our imaginations as a *gift* of God’s grace and to use them to enter deeply into the stories we hear on Sunday mornings or read on our own. It urges us to become a part of the narrative, to imagine *being* the different characters in these ancient, cherished stories. This stage of lectio divina invites us to discover who it is we feel the strongest connection to and then to explore what that connection might tell us about our own spiritual growth and struggles.

The problem, though, which is the problem in most – if not *all* – genuine spiritual practices, is that this form of prayer can show us things about ourselves we may not want to see. If you can sink into this kind of imaginative prayer with a Biblical story, you may find that you identify, not so much with someone you like and admire, but with the person or the character that you find annoying, irritating, ridiculous, or just plain icky. And if this happens – *when* it happens – as prayors, we have at least two choices. One is that we can decide that this kind of prayer just isn’t for us, or we can sit with our experience, willing to discover the lessons and the healing God is offering us.

Now, you all may or may not be able to guess why I started this Easter sermon with a brief explanation of lectio divina and some of its challenges. You may be able to guess that the answer has something to do with my own lectio prayer this past week with John’s description of the first Easter morning. Early last week, when I started reading and praying with this story of Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, the disciple Jesus loved, the angels, and Jesus, I wanted to feel connected and drawn to Mary. I wanted, in my prayers, to imagine being with her as she wept, as she looked into the tomb, as she pleaded to learn where the body of her beloved teacher and friend had been taken, and then as she heard her name and encountered the presence of the risen Christ.

I wanted to feel a deep kinship with Mary as she lived through that morning so long ago. I wanted to, I didn’t. Instead of feeling a connection with Mary as I prayed, I felt drawn to Simon Peter and the other disciple. I felt drawn to them as they seemed to dash here and there, racing each other to the tomb, with one of them looking into the tomb first and the other one being the first to go into the tomb, and then after all that, simply went home. The image I have of these two disciples here is an image of busyness and anxiety, an image of people in a hurry – a competitive hurry, at that – who, in spite the unbelievable things they’ve seen, decide just to go home. These may not be two guys I *want* to feel a real kinship and connection with, but I do ... and I doubt that I’m the only one who does.

Isn’t this so much of what our lives can look like? Don’t our lives – sometimes ... often ... maybe even almost always – resemble those two disciples on the first Easter

morning? We rush from here to there, taking our worries and anxieties with us. Jobs, volunteer activities, taking care of parents, taking care of and chauffeuring children, exercising, shopping, going to the doctor, e-mailing, attending church committee meetings, working in the thrift shop, coming to church to worship (sometimes more than once a week!)... the list seems endless, and it's anxiety-producing in its own right.

And that's only the outward version of the busyness that can engulf us and leave our spiritual lives sloshing out of the bowl the same way the water sloshed out of the bowl the children and I were using earlier in the service. We can be sitting perfectly still or lying quietly in bed in the middle of the night, but our minds and our souls may be restless and racing about. Our thoughts can run here and there, taking up our personal worries one minute, our concerns for the nation or the world the next, and then moving on to past wounds and resentments, as well as future plans.

So don't we often resemble those two disciples on Easter morning, running to investigate, popping their heads and then their bodies into the tomb, but then, seeing the tomb empty, simply go home ... maybe because they were worried about something else they needed to tend to? With instant communication, instant messaging, ever-faster computers, and ever-breaking news, isn't it all too easy to come to believe that we're meant to live at breakneck speed? Human life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has many different ways of inviting us into running here and there, with or without taking our bodies with us, but this morning's reading from the Gospel of John reminds us that running here and there – and not being willing to discover what is or may soon be standing right in front of us – isn't a new human phenomenon. We didn't invent it recently.

But why? What's in it for us that makes rushing through our mornings, our days, and our lives so enticing? Well, for one, there's the rush of adrenaline, the thrill of trying to get ten different things done, all at the same time. There's also the rush of believing that we and what we're doing is so important that it all must get done ASAP, because, if it doesn't, the world may fall apart. And I think, too, we start to fear that forces beyond our control – recession, terrorism, disease, our own mortality – are closing in on us, so we better hurry up and run faster.

But there's another, deeper reason. I think this other reason contains the core explanation for why we can have a horror of being still and being open to the stillness, and *this* other reason has everything to do with Mary Magdalene's tears on Easter morning. You see, if we're willing to risk being still and, once we're still, opening our eyes and our hearts, we may realize that the pain, the brutality, and the deaths of Good Friday are not limited to one day long ago in Jerusalem.

If we let ourselves stop running and fidgeting and fussing, we may find our hearts breaking with the pain of thousands upon thousands of crucifixions, crucifixions of the human body and spirit and of God's beauty and presence in the world. If we stop running and hiding, we may feel the pain of great loss and betrayal, the fear that the tenderness and healing grace Mary and the other disciples experienced through Jesus have indeed been put to death, and the sinking feeling that brute force and the human capacity for evil are more powerful than the vulnerable love of God that animated Jesus' life.

So, really, if we think about the choice between joining those running disciples or standing still with Mary at Jesus' tomb, I admit that running away and hiding with the guys seems a bit more attractive than staying with Mary and experiencing, not only our heartache, but the heartache of the world. It's no wonder Simon Peter and the other disciples headed home and locked their doors.

But, of course, our Easter story this morning doesn't end with Mary's broken heart and her flowing tears. She stands outside the tomb, grieving over what she lost when she saw Jesus die on the cross. She's mourning the loss of her friend and the hope his ministry gave her. She's mourning the loss of her hope that God is real – present, trustworthy, and loving. She's mourning the end of her hope that her life could be filled with the Spirit of God, and she's mourning the loss of her hope that human divisions and hatreds would one day be nothing but a distant memory.

This story doesn't end there; it doesn't end with Mary's mournful tears. In her stillness, in her grief, in her pain, Mary hears her name, and she recognizes the presence of the risen Christ. In the openness and vulnerability of her grief, she encounters the presence of the one in whom the power, grace, and love of God were tangibly, recognizably, and unimaginably visible. As the Gospel of John tells the story, it is Mary who, through her tears, is the first to see that nothing, not even brutality and death, can defeat the Spirit of God that animated and guided Jesus. It's weeping Mary, not the running disciples, who is given the gift of the Good News that no tomb can ever confine the love and life of God.

So, my beloved friends (and guests), can't you hear God's invitation to stop running and to quit hiding? As individuals, as a church, as a nation, we have much that we need to see and hear that will break our hearts. We each have our private hurts and betrayals, and we as a nation have hard, hard truths we need to face that we've been avoiding, truths that include racism, violence, and injustice.

Accept God's invitation, and dare to stop running. Dare to realize you have witnessed – and participated in – countless crucifixions. Dare to stand at the tomb where you think your most treasured dreams and your deepest longings – for yourself and for the world – lie lifeless, dead and decaying. Dare to have the courage to weep if the tears begin to come. And then be willing to listen, be willing to hear the Holy One calling your name, tenderly and with love.

Mary had the courage to weep outside the tomb. Her courage and her heart allowed her to hear and then see the Holy One who had been loving her through Jesus all along. Weeping, Mary encountered the Holy One that Christians across the centuries and across the world encounter in and through the Risen Christ. Mary was the first to encounter the Christ who lives on in those whose hearts are open to the need of the world and who have the courage to weep.

Dare to weep. Have the courage to weep, loudly or quietly, in public or in private. But, however you do it, let your heart be broken by the brokenness of the world, and see if you, too, hear your name called by the Holy One who loves you and all of creation. Listen for the voice that says to you, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you. You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you."

This is the voice of the One Mary encountered at the tomb. This is the voice of the Holy One whose love cannot be destroyed by violence or hate. This is the voice of the One whose love will never end. It is calling to you, to me, and to all of creation.

Hallelujah and amen.

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