

I Found Him Whom My Heart Loves

Love Made John Believe (John 20:1-10)

Dawn, Sunday morning.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone was rolled away. Christ's body was missing. Immediately, she ran back and reported this to Peter and John.

Peter and John ran to the tomb. John arrived first but did not enter the burial chamber. Peter came and entered the grave room. He saw the shroud rolled up on the shelf where Christ's body had been laid. The cloth which had covered his head was in a separate place. The body was gone.

John saw this and believed. What led him to faith? Did he conclude the body would not have been stolen because robbers would scarcely have taken the time to unwrap the body and carry away a nude, stiff corpse? John Chrysostom points out the unlikelihood of theft. "If anyone had removed the body, he would not have stripped it first. Nor would he have taken the trouble to roll up the head covering and put it in a place by itself" (*Homily 85, 4*).

The apostle John may have deduced that the body was not stolen, but love is the real explanation of his faith. Love is the best road to faith. John was the disciple whom Jesus loved. John welcomed and returned Christ's love. John alone of the apostles stood at the cross. It was to John that Jesus entrusted his mother.

Later Jesus would tell Thomas that seeing his body in order to come to faith was not as great as believing without seeing. Possibly Jesus looked at John when saying these words to Thomas. However, the key insight here is that it was the power of John's love for Jesus that enabled him to believe in the resurrection. In this gospel account, the disciple who was bound closest in love to Jesus was the fastest to look for him and the first to believe in him.

Jesus Calls Magdalene to Faith (John 20:11-18)

The story of another great lover of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, follows immediately. The process of how love brought her to faith is described in greater detail and introduces the normal biblical dialogue for faith events----a divine call and a human response. On that Easter morning, Magdalene lived out the description of a lover seeking the beloved as recounted in the Song of Songs.

*I will seek whom my heart loves...
The watchmen came upon me as they made their
Rounds of the city:
Have you seen him whom my heart loves?
I had hardly left them when I found him whom my heart loves.
I took hold of him and would not let him go.*

----Song of Songs 3:2-4

This text illustrates the drive of the lover to union with, presence to and possession of the beloved. Magdalene embodied this description perfectly. She had returned to the tomb and remained outside it weeping. She peered inside the chamber and saw two angles in white sitting on the grave bench. They asked her why she was weeping. She told them that someone had taken away the body of Jesus and she did not know where it was. At that moment she heard someone come up to the tomb. It was Jesus. But she did not recognize him.

The Easter narratives stress that the risen Jesus is often not recognized at first when he is encountered. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus failed to know him in the beginning. The apostles at Christ's lakeside appearance did not recognize him. Mary Magdalene thought he was a gardener.

Why is this so? For one thing, it teaches that Christ's followers were not credulously expecting his resurrection.

Second, it demonstrates that Christ's resurrected body was different from his historical body. St. Paul explained this to the Corinthians. "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible....It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (I Corinthians 15:42-44). Nonetheless, we have the same Jesus. The Christ of Galilee and Judea is the same Jesus after the resurrection, but his body is different----transformed, spiritual, glorified.

Last, just as it took faith to really know who was the Jesus of Nazareth, Capernaum and Jerusalem, so it will still require faith to recognize him in his risen state.

Jesus asked Magdalene why she was crying. Thinking he was the gardener, she asked him if he knew what happened to Christ's body. She would go and get it. Jesus said, "Mary." She replied, "Rabbouni," which means teacher. The process that led to Magdalene's recognition of Jesus involved four stages. (1). Jesus sought her out. (2). Mary was a seeker after Jesus. (3). The Master called her by name. (4). Mary responded in faith. This is the typical description of the four major steps in the faith journey in Scripture. God in search of humans. The human heart questing God. The call from God. The human response in faith.

The Emmaus disciples only recognized Jesus after the breaking of the bread. Mary only recognized Jesus after the "breaking" of the Word. Thus Jesus shows us the twofold ministry of his risen life---Sacrament and Word.

With the enthusiasm of love, Magdalene clung to Jesus. The Master gently said that she must let go of him. He must complete his saving work by going to the Father and send the Holy Spirit. He was not against her touching him, else why would he have invited Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and side? Magdalene had misunderstood his presence in the garden as his permanent presence. Jesus honored her by confiding in her that his permanent presence to her and all believers would be by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus approved her magnificent desire, her longing to be close to him, to possess her beloved, but he helped her see how it would be truly fulfilled. "Not yet," said Jesus, She must go to the apostles with his message and prepare them for his permanent presence in the Spirit. That is why the Christians of the Middle Ages praised Magdalene as the "Apostola apostolorum," the apostle to the apostles. That is why the next scene shows him breathing out the gift of the Spirit to the apostles. Magdalene prepared them for this gift.

Jesus Gives the Spirit to the Apostles (John 20:19-23)

Easter night.

The eleven apostles had returned to the Upper Room and locked the doors for fear of those Jews who had been involved in the crucifixion of Jesus. Thomas, however, had left earlier in the evening. Suddenly, Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you" (verse 19). At the Last Supper Jesus had shared his peace with them and told them to let go of their fear. He had promised to return to them and has now proved it.

He showed them the wound marks in his hands and his side. Joy overwhelmed them as they recognized the Lord. He then gave them the commission to continue his work in the world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (verse 21). Jesus depended on them and the Christian community to take his Good News to all the earth. At the same time, they will need the message, power and authority of Jesus to carry out such a mission. The Christian community depends on Jesus for its success.

Lastly, their mission must be similar to that of Jesus. As the Father had sent Jesus, so Christ sends them. As Jesus had obeyed the Father and represented him faithfully, so must the apostles and the Christian community obey Jesus and represent him faithfully. There can be no other message than that of Jesus. There can be no other name than that of Jesus to be preached.

Then Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. He accompanied this with words about the forgiving of sins. God the Father had breathed into Adam the breath of human life. Now Jesus breathed into the apostles the breath of the Holy Spirit, a divine life. Jesus conferred on the apostles the power of forgiving sins. They in turn pass on that power to others through ordination.

This brief scene is filled with truth. It reveals the fulfillment of the promise of the messiah. Jesus had come to save us from our sins and to give us a new life that will enable us to reach the fullness of humanity by the creative power of the Spirit. Risen from the dead, Jesus wears the marks of the cross to remind us that his passion and death were conditions for the gifts of love he now shares with us. The forgiveness of our sins is a grace, a costly grace. Risen, he convinces us that death can be overcome. Commissioning the apostles, he assures us that our sins are forgivable. Breathing on them, he excites us with the promise of personal fulfillment in its most positive sense, spiritual as well as in other ways.

Thomas, Do Not Be Unbelieving, But Believing (John 20:24-31)

When Thomas returned, the apostles told him the exciting news about the resurrection of Jesus. He protested that he would not believe unless he could see Jesus and put his finger into the nail marks and his hand into Jesus' side. The following Sunday night he was given the chance to do this. Jesus appeared again, once more said "Peace" and then invited Thomas to touch his wounds. "Do not be unbelieving, but believe" (verse 27). The text does not say whether Thomas actually inspected Christ's wounds in this way. Apparently, Christ's inviting word was enough. Thomas replied with these beautiful words of faith. "My Lord and my God" (verse 28). Jesus then commented that the people who have not seen and believed are truly blessed.

In some ways Thomas seems very modern in his doubt and pessimism. The comedian, Woody Allen, has made his reputation by making jokes out of popular questioning of all traditional values. "How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?...Can technology really be the answer to it all when my toaster hasn't worked properly in four years."

The contemporary form of doubting is questioning. One must distinguish between good questioning and bad. Good questioning involves an honest curiosity about life, a quest for facts and truth. It embraces the attitude of wonder which is the capacity to see beneath the surface of things. Good questioning is the soul of philosophy, science, and scholarship.

Bad questioning is a veiled attack on cherished values. It is a hidden agenda for cynicism. It is a cover-up for pessimism. This kind of questioning sounds innocent, but underneath it is a negative attitude. It reminds one of the proverb, “A fool can ask more questions than a wise man can answer.” Instead of being a sincere search for truth, it really challenges the credibility of the truthsayer.

Is doubting a problem for Christians today? Yes, for some of them. They veil their doubts in the fashionable, socially acceptable cloud of questions. They sound like they have a heartfelt desire for truth, but in reality they mask a cynicism about moral values and the truth claims of Jesus. But there are also Christians who have sincere doubts and raise questions that reveal their heartfelt search for God. They are truly seekers. With time, grace, patience and love, they will receive God’s reassuring response.

As we said, Thomas sounds very modern. He might easily say today, “I have serious reservations about your statements, dear brother apostles. Are you certain you saw Jesus? You don’t think you are suffering from a bad case of wish fulfillment? Perhaps you were trying to force your dreams to come true? I want to believe you. Help me get at what you evidently experienced.”

In other words Thomas was an honest broker. He did not have a closed mind. He was willing to listen, to probe and be open to the possibility they shared with him. He is intrigued by their news, but ever the cautious man who realizes truth is not won easily. He is an example of the wholesome questioning practiced today. It proved he was a seeker after truth. He sought and he found. He met Jesus and worshiped him. “My Lord and my God!”

I have to question, Thomas said.

That’s my way.

Kill my question and I’ll be dead.

It’s my say.

Jesus the answer entered the room.

Touch me now.

In his heart deep faith did loom.

My Lord, Wow!