March 31, 2013 – Easter

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Happy Easter! I want to make sure to welcome all of the visitors we have with us here today. Thank you for sharing your Easter with us!

I am here to tell you that I'm pretty sure this was the longest Lent and Holy Week on record. And don't get all logical on me and say that it really was only 40 days and 7 days, respectively, because I'm sure that somehow the laws of time got messed up this year. For those of you who don't know me, and haven't heard me whingeing about just about everything this season, this is actually my very first year as a priest. And holy cow, does it look a lot different from up here!

That same time distortion must have been how Mary Magdalene felt after she had witnessed the horrible death of Jesus two days before. Like the minutes and hours just crawled along, making no sense and having no meaning. The great festival of Passover must have seemed empty and lifeless to her and the other disciples. Perhaps they had even defied the religious authorities and merely ate a silent meal together in that upper room. Everything they had worked for and hoped for had come to a disastrous end.

Perhaps Mary couldn't sleep the night after the Sabbath, and finally got up before the sun was up, slipped through the silent streets of Jerusalem, planning on going and merely sitting by her Lord's tomb. She couldn't hope to roll back the stone by herself, but she couldn't stay away either.

Imagine her horror and astonishment to find the stone rolled back, and the body of Jesus gone! What must have been going through her mind at that moment? Was it grave robbers? What did they think they would find? And if not robbers, who? The Pharisees? The Romans, intent on some new degradation? Hadn't they done enough?

I love John's empty tomb account the best, because it's so human. We hear about individuals, and their unique responses to this mystery, instead of groups of people all reacting the same. And John goes into such loving detail! As low as Mary felt at that moment, she had the presence of mind to get Peter and another disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (and who most scholars speculate is actually John himself, being modest.)

They race back to the tomb with Mary, and John specifically says that the beloved disciple actually outran Peter, but then pulled up short – either deferring to Peter, chickening out, or actually getting elbowed out of the way. They both confirm what Mary had told them, with the additional detail, which only Peter seems to notice, that the burial cloths were not left the way they should have been if someone had snatched the body away in a hurry. But the two don't know what to make of it all, and head back to town, leaving Mary there alone.

To me this is one of the most heartbreaking moments of this whole heartbreaking scene. Mary, standing there alone, weeping, can't help but look into the tomb one more time, just in case they'd all been somehow mistaken and he's still there. But it's not Jesus' body she sees, but two angels sitting there, one at the head and one at the foot of where Jesus had been.

Through her tears and her anguish, she doesn't see them as angels. And she certainly doesn't recognize the similarity of this scene to the high altar in the Temple, the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies with its flanking cherubim, where an offering and sacrifice was made for all once a year. And such is her grief, that she is focused on only one thing – finding the body of Jesus.

And then she turns around and there he is. Standing right in front of her, in the flesh. But her sadness and her tears have completely blinded her, and besides, why should she expect to see him? She saw him die! No, it must be the gardener, come to work early. She begs him to tell her where Jesus' body is. Not for him to go get it, or to be blamed for taking it. She just wants to see Jesus one more time, to be with him, even dead. She can't let go.

It's not until he says her name that she sees him for who he is, just as he had said earlier in John, that his own sheep follow him because they know his voice. "Teacher!" she cries, and her first impulse is to run to him, to throw her arms around him, to hold him. To hold him down and not let him go.

But he backs away – fends her off. Do not hold on to me, but go tell your brothers and sisters that you have seen the Lord! In one sense, this is when Easter really begins. It's a rollercoaster of emotion for Mary, from grief to bewilderment, to joy, and finally to joyful obedience. In the end she becomes the Apostle to the Apostles.

As I said, I love John's resurrection account because of its intense and loving humanity. There is so much of Mary in all of us. Who hasn't been so blinded by tears, either literal or figurative, of grief, anger, frustration, or helplessness that we haven't been able to see God standing right in front of us?

And who hasn't wanted to hold God down to earth, to fit him into a box of our own devising, to make him a tame God? We see a lot of that today. Jesus has given us some pretty specific instructions – love God and our neighbors, feed the poor, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison. But even with that clear teaching, it seems that many times people would rather use Jesus as a club to get people to do what THEY think is right than actually DO what is right.

Mary, for all her emotions and her humanity, got it right. Rather than question Jesus, or insist on holding on to him, she went right about the business of doing the work he had given her to do. Her Lord was alive and the earth was somehow righted on its axis again. The strife was over and the battle won.

In times of our greatest anguish, it's sometimes nearly impossible to still our hearts and minds enough to hear our name being softly called by Jesus. But even if we can't recognize him, he's right there. Right in front of us, calling our name, loving us. He might look like a gardener, or a friend, or a spouse, or a priest, because all of them, all of US, are the Body of Christ. Easter is not JUST the risen Christ. Easter is also our human hands and feet and hearts and minds and strength, as the risen Christ on earth.

I think I've told a few of you this, but several years ago, a dear friend and wonderful composer named Gayla Morgan and I began work on a musical about Mary Magdalene. And last spring, finally, we had an Equity showcase reading of it in New York City. The last scene of the show is Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus at the tomb, and it ends (of course) with a blockbuster, full cast number called Love is Alive. I'd like to close with the lyrics from that song:

Love is alive, Love is alive!

Look into each other’s eyes and see! Love is with you.

Together, we will show the world that Love is alive!

Love is alive, Love is alive!

Love cannot be bound by death. Yes! Love is with us.

Together we will show the world that Love is alive!

In every face, we see love.

In you, in them, in me, love.

Love is alive, Love is alive!

We face our future filled with joy,

For love is alive in us!

ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!

THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA!