

**MARY'S WITNESS; JOHN 20:1-18; EASTER, APRIL 5, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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A few weeks ago, in our Lenten dinner/discussion series, we heard a presentation by a young UB law professor on the subject of immigration. He began his talk by saying that he wanted to lower our expectations for what he had to say because he was told the secret to a good speech was meeting the expectations of your audience; and, since the topic of immigration is so complex, he wanted us to hope for less than perhaps we came into the room hoping for.

I want to start today by doing *the opposite*; I want to *raise your expectations* for this Easter sermon not because the topic is easy or simple but because given the world we live in most of us are ill-equipped to get the message of Resurrection with anything less than exchanging our old worldview for a new one. So that's my goal, that by the end of this sermon you will embrace a new world, you will have become a citizen in a new kingdom.

It just so happens Mary Magdalene is the perfect guide for us in this endeavor. When we meet her outside the empty tomb, early that first Easter morning when it was still dark, she is living in the darkness of her old world. But eighteen verses later she inhabits a new realm.

It's not hard to figure out where Mary was coming from. The life she knew was dominated by two realities – the Roman government and the religious authorities, both powerful: the Romans by force of arms; the priests by virtue of the religious laws they governed that dictated the norms of society.

It wasn't complicated. Life had gone on for centuries this way and would continue to do so – no one expected either the Romans or the priests to let go of their jealously guarded power.

But for Mary and the common people it wasn't easy living in or near poverty; eking out an existence; observing countless religious restrictions, paying alms to the Temple and taxes to Caesar.

When she came to the tomb in the dark of that morning, she was expecting to grieve privately near the corpse of Jesus, just as she expressed her loyalty and love for him staying at the cross until he breathed his last.

This man who had given her so much, who changed her life by exorcising not one but seven demons, and who unlike anyone else, ignored her reputation as a 'woman of the night,' this good and just man was unjustly taken.

It's how the world worked: threaten the authorities, pay the price. Do the right thing, say the right thing, like he did, and risk your life. Certain causes had certain effects; the trick was to figure it out, play the game, get what you could, be smart and safe. We, too, live in a world in which the causes and effects of life are stacked against many people: from black and Latino Americans who are arrested and incarcerated with excessive force in far disproportionate numbers to the general population; to those who've looked so long for work, they've given up looking; to young families left behind by the rising cost of living.

You see, Mary's world and ours have some things in common. On the international scene things are not all that different from the days of Pax Romana. We live in the era of Pax Americana. But the pax is deceiving, all is not at peace; and the extent to which there is "peace" is because our military keeps would be disturbers of the peace at bay, until terrorism and violence erupt.

Stamp it out and it pops up elsewhere; invest billions in shady regimes that are at least willing to fight the threat; send troops to battlefields to fight for territory no one wants; not unlike Roman legionnaires. The politicians immersed in corruption, unwilling to pass a sweeping ethics bill in Albany, not to mention Washington cunningly fighting each other; with little regard for the wellbeing of the commonwealth not to mention the planet.

In some ways, the world doesn't really change that much from generation to generation.

But we, *unlike Mary*, have science you might say. Indeed we do. Science has given us advances that improve the quality and length of life that would, without science, not be possible: transportation; communication; medical research.

We're so enamored of science that we like to say everything we do is based on science because science will tell us the best way to grow our crops, or educate our children, or treat our sick, or even extend our lives.

Wait a minute – did I say science would improve our agriculture, educational system, health care and quality of life as we age? Maybe everyone in the room would not agree with that. Sometimes we use science to reinforce the medical/industrial complex or inflate corporate profits. The scientists themselves often object to this. Or they tell us that "the science has changed" on what we thought was the established norm. Like the report forty-five years *after* the rage about low cholesterol diets that the cholesterol we eat isn't the cholesterol that shows up in our bloodstream. Or that four cups of coffee a day is fine because a new study says so; or that two glasses daily of red wine are not so good as was originally thought. Even science isn't stable.

What I'm saying, on the one hand, is that science is often used to keep the old system in place like religious laws were used to control society in Mary's day; on the other hand, I'm saying that science itself is ever changing—*which is part of the beauty of science*. What this tells us is that science doesn't have all the answers and isn't able to completely dissect and describe the world we live in; there will never be a time when new research doesn't refute old research; which is to say that the universe will never be completely explained by the scientific method.

It's also true that there are things like black holes and wormholes that turn traditional methods of doing science and understanding the laws of nature upside down and until recently we couldn't even comprehend.

What I am saying this Easter Sunday is that there are some striking similarities to Mary's world and ours; and that reality is bigger than we often think; I am not saying we can prove Resurrection; but I am saying there is room for it if we expand our view of the world.

Let's get back to Mary. When she gets to the grave in the dark of the early morning and sees the stone rolled away, she concludes, logically, that Jesus' body has been stolen. Given the controversy surrounding him, it could have been anyone: Joseph of Arimathea, religious leaders, grave robbers; her conclusion makes sense.

Dead bodies do not simply "disappear." Someone has to move them. In a world of cause and effect, of established rules as to what can and can't happen and how, in a closed structure that allows only for the old and familiar to recur, Mary's logic is right on target. Find the body, wherever it has been taken, and get on with grieving.

When she tells the disciples this disturbing news, Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb. When they get there Peter enters first, finds the scattered grave cloths, the other disciple goes in, sees what Peter saw, then, says John, "he believed and they returned to their homes because as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead." What the other disciple believed was not that Jesus had been raised (as some commentaries suggest); otherwise, why would we be told 'they did not yet understand'? What the other disciple believed was what Mary told them: that the body had been stolen.

This is a story still shrouded in death. Mary and the two disciples are still using the logic and lens of the old world to understand an empty tomb. Mary is looking for death. That's all she sees; that's all her death logic *will allow* her to see.

But her closed world (and ours) is broken open *when Jesus calls her name*. Something illogical, impossible, and unnatural takes place. The one who was certified as dead *greet*s her. The established rules as to what can happen and how are overthrown. The old plausibility structure is left in shambles.

It's not so easy to throw off the logic of cause and effect; the old lens of a closed world in which everything is contained and subject to reason, analysis and explanation. ***And here is the critical detail of the story: Mary doesn't throw off her old way of seeing things; it falls off on its own, like scales from her eyes, when the Risen Christ greets her.***

John is saying *we* cannot make Resurrection happen; it's not as if we had more biblical, theological knowledge it would be easier to comprehend; all we have is the testimony of those who witnessed the presence of Christ with them after Easter.

We're all amateurs when it comes to making sense of the Resurrection. It takes all of us by surprise. We can't work our way to it. Resurrection must work its way toward us.

Carol and I are hooked on the new version of the *Odd Couple* Thursday nights. Felix, the control freak, lives in the world of cause and effect; he's funny because he reminds some of us of ourselves and because his attempts to control everything from dust to damsels to his damned friend Oscar are ill-fated from the beginning. It's as if he's wearing an emotional straight jacket or blinders. Hard as he tries in each episode, he can't get out of himself to see how ridiculous he looks and change.

I said at the beginning of the sermon that Mary is the perfect guide for our endeavor to become citizens of a new kingdom. In some ways she was living in a world similar to ours with the same limitations and expectations we experience.

You see, her story is our story. Like her, we come here today, to this mystery called Easter. Like her, and the two disciples, we may not know exactly what to make of all this. We have questions, just like them. We may not yet know, for sure, who Jesus really is.

Maybe there's some death we are grieving, like Mary, or some old wound that won't heal, or some new diagnosis or development at home or work. Death is always close. We have two members now in hospice and one whose father died yesterday. I received word last week that the nephew of an old friend was murdered at random, walking down a street in an upscale neighborhood in Charleston, SC recently. My hunch is, like Mary, more than a few of us approach our own circumstances this morning in the dark, with low expectations and closed logic, yet deep longing in our hearts.

We are like Lazarus in William Butler Yeats' play "Calvary"; Lazarus, the best friend of Jesus, protests as soon as Jesus raises him from the dead because death is finally static and safe; more comfortable than life. Life, Lazarus laments and tells Jesus, is unpredictable, unmanageable, even dangerous. Life involves risk. When death arrives the mystery of life ends; stasis ensues; stress and struggle cease.

It's not easy to come out of our little tombs, our 'safe havens' as my poetry mentor calls them. He draws squiggly lines under the words and phrases in my poems that either don't ring true or that sound too predictable. The fascinating thing is as soon as I probe deeper, closer to my heart, perhaps where there are painful memories or unfinished business or unanswered questions the poems begin to breathe and come alive.

At least Mary was at the tomb that morning; she was the only one; there is something endearing in her decision to get up early and go by herself to the place where the body of Jesus lay. It's no accident that you are here, today, either. Who knows what got you here. It's not important. What matters most is you are!

We can't make resurrection happen but when we give God a willing heart, like Mary, you never know what will come next.

In her wildest dreams she never would have predicted, as she made her way to the graveyard, through the quiet streets of Jerusalem that morning, that she would soon be standing in front of the disciples saying, "I have seen the Lord!"

Her logical language of cause and effect, when she hears his voice, is replaced by the language of confession. It is a confession that will sustain her in a new era, in a new kingdom, in her new life. And the disciples, to whom she made it, took one look at her face and knew that she was leading them into a whole new world. Amen.