

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 10: 34 – 43  
Colossians 3: 1 – 4

Psalm 118: 1 – 2, 14 – 24  
John 20: 1 – 18

-----

And so, as C. S. Lewis once wrote, we come to the strangest story of all: the story of the resurrection. The day on which the course of human history – and human future – changes forever.

On this day, when it is not yet daylight, Mary of Magdala, makes her way to the garden where the tomb is in which Jesus' body was laid. She had planned to sit quietly and pray, to sit Shiva, for her dearest friend, her teacher, her Jesus. But she is shocked to come up on the cave-like tomb and discover that the massive, round stone, like a biscuit set on its side, which had sealed off the entrance, has been rolled away. She can see that the tomb is empty. Mary runs back to the city, perhaps in terror or confusion at not knowing what this might mean, perhaps in anger that someone might have stolen Jesus' body, perhaps in sadness that the one thing she had left to count on has also been taken away from her.

Mary finds Peter and the 'other disciple whom Jesus loved' and tells them that "they" – somebody, some people – "have taken Jesus' body and "we" (John doesn't record anyone but Mary being there) don't know where to find him." Alarmed, and perhaps also terrified, confused, angry and sad, the two men spring up and race to the tomb. It has not yet occurred to any of the three that all the things that Jesus had foretold and promised them might just be coming true.

The second disciple reaches the tomb first, kneels down and looks into it, but doesn't enter. Perhaps he refrains from entering because he is not sure what will happen if he does, or because it is holy ground. Sure enough, just as Mary had said, there is no body, only the linen wrappings, the shroud, in which Jesus' body had been swaddled. By this time, Peter has also reached the tomb, and pushing past his friend, he enters into the darkened interior. He, too, sees the linens, lying on the shelf which had only recently held Jesus' body, and he notices that the piece which had covered Jesus' head is separate from the rest. The other disciple then, too, enters the small cave. And somehow, his mind – or perhaps his heart – begins to put two and two together and gets infinity. He realizes the Truth of what has happened, and the immensity of it overwhelms his heart and mind. With nothing else to be done at the tomb, the two men return to the city and share their experience with the others.

Mary, though, stays at the tomb, not quite sure what to do next. She has not yet comprehended what the second disciple has, and *her* heart and mind, as well as her eyes, are clouded with renewed grief and tears. As the tears stream from somewhere deep within her, she bends down again to look into the low opening of the tomb. Where only the linen wrappings had been a moment or two ago, now there are two beings, two angels, sitting calmly, one at each end of the ledge that had held the body.

Although the response would seem obvious, the angels ask Mary why she is weeping. Perhaps the first step is always to name the problem. "They've taken away Jesus and I don't know where to find him!" Mary says in a heart-wrenching, desperate, sobbing voice. Sensing the presence of someone behind her, Mary turns to see the figure of a man. In turning from the darkness of the tomb, her eyes can only really see the outline of the man, silhouetted against the now risen Sun/Son. Mary assumes, not unreasonably, that this man is somehow the caretaker, the gardener. And she is both wrong and

profoundly right at the same time. The man gently asks her the very same question that the angels just asked, "Why are you weeping?" And then, without waiting for a response, "Whom are you looking for?"

Still assuming him to be the gardener, the one tending the tombs, she wonders if he is the one responsible, for some unknown reason, for moving the body of her beloved Jesus. In her desperation to find him and reclaim his body, she offers to take Jesus' body off this man's hands. One wonders if there is a trace of a smile on the lips of Jesus at that nonsensical suggestion as he calls her name, just as he has done hundreds of times before, "Mary."

Stunned out of her grief, Mary's eyes grow wide with clarity, with possibility, with joy. There can be only one person with that voice. Her mind reeling with trying to comprehend the incomprehensible, Mary cries out, "Rabbouni!, Teacher!" Instinctively, her hands reach out to grasp, to touch, to make real, this vision that might only be a figment of her imagination and hope. Jesus' response seems puzzling. "Don't hold onto me, because I've not yet ascended to the Father!" Given that he will soon invite Thomas to reach out and touch his body, it's clear that Jesus isn't telling her not to touch him. Instead, he's saying, "Things are changing. Our relationship is changing. Don't hold on to the old ideas of who you think I am." Mary understands his meaning and she is not rebuffed. As hard as it must be for her to turn away from him and leave, Mary becomes the apostle to the apostles. She runs all the way back into the city, her heart nearly bursting with the Good News with which she has been entrusted. "I have seen the Lord!" she calls out to Peter and the other disciple, to Jesus' friends and followers, and the world is forever changed.

And so, indeed, we come to the strangest story of all. What a wonderful, peculiar, passionate and deeply loving God we have! A God who goes to these lengths to show us that there is absolutely nothing, not even the Cross, which can stand in the way of God loving us. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves unloved by God. Nothing. The arms of God are open wide for everyone, and most especially on the cross.

Brendan Manning, author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, tells this story. There was an old man who used to sit under a big old tree on the banks of the Ganges River every morning to meditate. One morning, after he had finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water. As the scorpion was washed closer to the tree, the old man quickly stretched himself out on one of the long roots that branched out into the river and reached out to rescue the drowning creature. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand. A moment later, after he had regained his balance, he stretched himself out again on the roots to save the scorpion. This time, the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail, that his hand became greatly swollen and bloody, and the man's face contorted with pain.

At that moment, a passerby saw what the old man was trying to do, and shouted out to the man, "Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature. Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?"

The old man turned his head. Looking into the stranger's eyes, he calmly said, "My friend, just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save." That, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the kind of God we have. A God whose nature it is to save. No matter the cost. What a wonderful, peculiar, passionate and deeply loving God we have!

There is another fitting legend. This one, recounted by author Madeleine L'Engle, is about Judas. It is told, that after his death, Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep, slimy pit. For thousands of years, he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw, way up there, a tiny glimmer of light. After he'd contemplated it for another thousand years, he began to try to climb up towards it. The walls of the pit were dank and slimy, and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top, only to slip and fall all the way back down. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance. Then he started to climb up again. After many more efforts and failures, he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around a table. "We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin till you came."

We have a God who, despite our incomprehension, despite our tendency to lash out and sting, despite our proclivity for falling and failing, continues to reach out to us time and again. A God who continues to wait for us because the party isn't going to start until all of God's children are there. A God of inexorable love who continues to say, "I love you THIS MUCH!" (*arms outstretched*) Happy Easter, from our wonderful, peculiar, passionate and deeply loving God. Alleluia!

+