

John 20:1-18: **Interpreted by Love**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY

9 April 2023

Listen with hope to these verses from the Gospel of John, chapter 20 (CEB):

¹ Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

¹¹ Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. ¹³ The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*).

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

The worst thing happened. Family, friends, and followers of Jesus saw their loved one arrested and put through a sham trial with an immediate unjust conviction. Hours later they witnessed the empire very publicly torture Jesus to death.

When trauma finally ends it can give way to a strange, mechanical dullness for those still left alive. Life continues but the world is never the same again. It can take tremendous effort just to eat breakfast, let alone to dream that your spirit will ever heal.

I imagine that's where we find Mary at the beginning of this story. Has she gotten any sleep at all? Before dawn the ache of loss draws her to the tomb where Jesus was buried.

And Mary begins her garden morning by looking at *things*. The first object she notices is the stone, surprisingly situated away from the tomb entrance. That leaves Mary concerned for Jesus' body; she seems to assume it's been stolen. But at first she doesn't go inside to check (would you walk into a recently-used or recently-robbed tomb?).

For Mary, the worst thing imaginable turns...even worse. Even in death, Jesus' body doesn't get the honor of quiet rest.

So Mary runs to alert others; a couple disciples and Mary all run back. The disciples find the tomb eerily empty. Finally through her tears Mary does look into the tomb. She sees two luminous beings but doesn't seem to be captivated by who they are — in her fog of grief she's also now worried about graverobbing. After answering their question, Mary turns around to find "the gardener," someone she sees according to his presumed function.

He repeats the angels' question, "Woman, why are you crying?" and he adds more personally "Who are you looking for?" Mary asks this "gardener" to show her where to retrieve Jesus' body.

Before we get to the climax of this story, we might consider *how* we tend to read it. Are we maybe immune to its power because we've heard it all before? Or is our first impulse to employ all our critical thinking tools and get mired in dissecting the text?

If either of those feels tempting, today let's try a different approach. Literature professor Alan Jacobs wrote a beautiful book called *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*.¹ Hermeneutics is a fancy word that means interpretation. Jacobs makes an argument for reading texts with charity. It's an impulse that comes from Jesus' call to meet the Other, the stranger, with *love*. Jacobs' book has stuck with me as I do Bible study, as well as when I read almost anything else. I might miss the beauty and the gift of a book or a story if I don't approach it with loving curiosity. Just like I would a person.

The alternative would be an attitude of criticism. Starting from criticism can be deadly to relationship. (You'll understand that if you've ever tried it.) And starting from criticism can be deadly to reading. What if, instead, we treat each story like it has a life and a voice of its own, like it has something to teach us?

So let's try to encounter this ancient resurrection story with charity — with the possibility that it can change us. Even better, the way that Jesus and Mary interpret each other in the story gives us a model for seeing and reading with love.

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/288492.A_Theology_Of_Reading

Because while Mary still thinks Jesus must be the gardener, Jesus begins to nudge Mary out of her thing-oriented state. By speaking just her name, Jesus invites his friend Mary — draws Mary — to turn to him and really look, to really recognize who he is. She responds straightaway with a word that means “My teacher!” Wham: we’re back into the mystery and beauty of relationship.

In hearing Jesus say her name, *love* cuts through her grief and she sees the resurrected Christ. “Through the intimacy of Mary’s name, the reality of the resurrection [gets] revealed.”² In these verses Mary has been encountering everything and everyone as an *It*, but she and Jesus now meet each other as *You*. They interpret each other through the eyes of love.

Why does that moment matter on this Easter Sunday? Because dead people, of course, cannot respond as living persons. Until that moment of recognition, Mary treats Jesus as if he were dead, unresponsive, as she and everyone else expected. Jesus subverts every normal expectation by being *alive*. And in that moment of love, Mary recognizes the resurrection. Mary can see Jesus, talk with him, love him, learn from him, reveal herself to him as he has revealed himself to her.

Friends, this is God’s great good news: Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!**

Jesus reveals his whole, resurrected, living self to Mary. She responds with her whole self, recognizing Jesus with the eyes of love. That love builds up inside Mary into faith that can move mountains, empowering Mary to preach unbelievable, world-changing news. Mary finds those disciples who have followed Jesus for three years and she proclaims to them, “I’ve seen the Lord.”

We might presume that Mary Magdalene’s name tells us where she’s from, a town called Magdala. But nobody really knows where such a town might have been. And the word “magdala” means tower. Strong recent scholarship suggests that for the early church, and for the biblical writers, Mary Magdalene was her *title*: Mary the Tower. A fitting title for Mary, apostle to the apostles.

Last summer Diana Butler-Bass preached a sermon highlighting this powerful biblical research and its implications. That sermon went viral and I strongly encourage you to go read it. It’s called “All the Marys.” She says near the end:

Mary is indeed the tower of faith. [O]ur faith is the faith of that woman who would become the first person to announce the resurrection. Mary the Witness, Mary the Tower, Mary the Great...³

Can we, with Mary, see the resurrected Jesus with the eyes of love? Because love is what this faith is all about. Jesus Christ went to his death breathing love for his enemies. God, whose love cannot be killed, raised Jesus because God will not let the worst thing be the last thing.

The resurrection of Jesus means that there’s something greater than the worst thing we can imagine. In this world it’s hard to conceive of any timeline where death isn’t the end. So we’re bombarded with messages about how to cheat death, how to look younger longer — how to pretend that we ourselves will live forever.

² O’Day, Gail R. *The Women’s Bible Commentary*. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992. p. 301.

³ <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/mary-the-tower>

This story is different. John's gospel doesn't flinch from the tragic news that Jesus died. That we all must die. But that worst thing is not the *last* thing because for God, the last thing is always *love*. Christ's resurrection feels like the climax in God's epic universal effort to communicate how much we are loved.

What if Mary had stayed lost in grief, seeing only the stone and the missing body? What if she never had recognized Jesus, never had told anyone about encountering him? That would have made this a much more normal human story. And a much less hopeful one.

Thank God Jesus spoke her name in love. And she recognized him. Because as one colleague says, "The church's legacy is resurrection."⁴ We should be all about joining Mary in proclaiming God's mindblowing ability to bring life out of death.

Diana Butler-Bass asks:

What does a Christianity of Mary the Tower look like? And what in the world might that towering faith have to say to this moment of crisis in which we live?⁵

People of God, let's keep trying to answer those questions together. One thing I know is that a resurrected Jesus empowers us with *hope*. The worst thing is never the last thing, thanks to the living, loving, resurrecting God.

We began Lent with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Over time the worst thing does happen to him. But today we end up with him *alive* and encountering Mary in a garden. And what's a garden except a wilderness nurtured with hope, with resurrection?

Lisel Mueller's family narrowly escaped from Germany during the early Nazi years.⁶ She later became a writer whose poetry interprets the world with truthfulness, lament, and love. This is her poem called "Hope."⁷

It hovers in dark corners
before the lights are turned on,
it shakes sleep from its eyes
and drops from mushroom gills,
it explodes in the starry heads
of dandelions turned sages,
it sticks to the wings of green angels
that sail from the tops of maples.

It sprouts in each occluded eye
of the many-eyed potato,
it lives in each earthworm segment
surviving cruelty,
it is the motion that runs

⁴ The Rev. Beth Neel, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Portland OR.

⁵ <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/mary-the-tower>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisel_Mueller

⁷ <https://wordsfortheyear.com/2017/10/04/hope-by-lisel-mueller/>

from the eyes to the tail of a dog,
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs
of the child that has just been born.

It is the singular gift
we cannot destroy in ourselves,
the argument that refutes death,
the genius that invents the future,
all we know of God.

It is the serum which makes us swear
not to betray one another;
it is in this poem, trying to speak.

Friends, Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!**

In the name of Jesus Christ: Incarnate, Crucified, and Resurrected.