

THE CHALLENGE OF EASTER

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Mary stumbled and fell in the dark. Her hand and elbow scraped against the ugly rocks and though she couldn't see it, she knew she was bleeding. No matter. She had bled before.

On she stumbled through the clutching darkness, along a half remembered path. She felt her way to the garden tomb. Gradually, the cold gray light of early dawn outlined the naked rock that should have sealed the tomb, the place where they had buried her best friend.

The reality, the horror hit her instantly. Even in his death they could not give him peace. This kind and gentle friend had died the cruel death of criminals, and now to add to all the insult, someone had stolen Jesus' body. Screaming, she crashed back down the path back to the house where she'd been mourning Jesus death since that horror filled Friday. Screaming, she yelled for Peter. For the others. "They've taken him away. Damn them anyway. They couldn't let him rest. Peter, come, they've stolen Jesus' body. Oh my God! How can people be so brutal?"

Now again, with Peter, she scabbled up the path toward the tomb. Her rage carried her now. Her unfocused anger at this outrage carried her through the bitter morning darkness up the broken path, rocks and bushes scratched and tore her skin until she stood chest heaving, beside Peter at the open tomb. Then she and Peter forced themselves to believe the unbelievable.

He's gone, Mary." There was stunned, deadness in his voice. "All they left us was a corpse. Now they've got that too." And Peter stumbled off, going nowhere but away from this revolting desecration.

Mary stayed. She had nowhere to go. She had nothing left. The power of her rage was spent. She was exhausted. She slumped her deadened body on a rock.

Head in hands she sat. Her mind shut down. She felt nothing. Not even the will to die.

Then memories. Memories of terror. Memories of despair. The pain of life in hometown Madgala came back – back in all its horrors. The darkness of that other life in that small town where she was beaten, starved and raped. Where people called her "whore" though she was not. Where she wall called "possessed of seven demons." It wasn't till she remember overhearing rumors of a healer, just down the lakeside at Capernaum, that a sense of feeling returned, and with the feeling, tears – tears that slowly washed her dry, red, angry eyes, tears that moved to moans, then into body heaving sobs, great gasping, screaming cries that found their way from the bottom of her wounded soul.

Through the prism of tears she saw the light of dawn slanting through the rocks into the garden. And there, in that golden light, a figure, a man it could any man, it must be the gardener, who else would be in this place so early. “Look, if you took his body, tell me where, please, just tell me where, so I can go and get him and give him a decent, human burial. Tell me, for God’s sake tell me.”

“Mary.” The voice was gentle. It seemed to come from another world. It took some moments to move its way through her sobs and her consciousness. She heard it a second time. “Mary.”

Through her tears – through her salted tears of pain and anger and rejection, Mary saw him. “Rabbi,” she whispered, and then shouted, “Rabbi!” Springing to her feet to embrace him, the light of morning sparkling through her tears, Mary rushed toward her Jesus.

“Please don’t touch me, Mary ,” he said. “There are reasons. Don’t be afraid Mary. But go and tell our friends that death has been transformed to life and that despair has turned to hope.”

This time the path unrolled beneath her dancing feet. This time the amber rocks and greening bushes sparkled in the morning light. This time she shouted her hope to all her friends.

“I have seen him. He’s alive. It’s true. All that he said is true. God loves us. All of us. And death and pain are not the end of life.¹

The gardener she supposes. This person so familiar to her Mary mistook him for the gardener. The gardener calls her by name. She recognized the voice, the presence, the person. Not the one she knew. No longer flesh and blood. Not longer the countenance familiar from those calm and tranquil days gathering crowds across Galilee and Judea. No longer the one hounding the religious types in their sacred precincts. No longer the one bringing succor and healing to those deemed outside the pale. No longer the parched and dying figure hanging from the cross beyond the city wall. Mary turns from the tomb. She directs her gaze from the world of death and crucifixion and confronts – What? A discontinuity? A new quality of existence? An alternative to life as we know it? In this Gospel, through rich metaphor, John shows a dramatic, decisive, radical change breaking in among us. He shows us an alternative world to the one where the likes of Jesus can be crucified. He tells us of a world where human life – yours and mine – rests finally on love and trust. When Mary joyfully acknowledges and rejoices in the new presence, unity, solidarity, and the embracing of our lives by unconquerable love assert themselves as victors over a world laced with the likes of crucifixion – love triumphant over all that would splinter, separate, divide, set us against one another, do us in, kill us.

And yes, John’s startling images not only asset and depict such fantastic news, they all challenge us to become right now that radically new, loving world –community among ourselves. This narrative challenges us, in a new world, to live differently for one another. Now.

¹*Rumors* Ralph Milton’s E-zine for people of faith with a sense of humor.

Live differently? In what way? Resurrection community means, first of all, dissolving the walls separating us from one another. If anything, the radically new presence of Jesus in John's narrative affirms a promise that we can bring again to one another. What is between us, hobbling us, crippling us in our relationship with one another can be healed, renewed, reclaimed. No relationship is so injured, so broken, and so mutilated that it cannot be recreated. Talk about an Easter challenge.

Reinhold Niebuhr told a story of a little boy kicked around from foster home to foster home, incorrigible, a threat to life and limb, a toxic terror. Finally, assigned to a home where he exercised the worst he could muster, tearing the living room apart, making a mess of everything he touched, hurling insults, throwing tantrums, his new adoptive father, in a decisive encounter, took that boy in his arms and told him, "No matter what you do we are never going to let you go!"

Hear that? "No matter what you do we're never going to let you go."

Pardoned! So what? In gratitude we offer pardon. It is an Easter challenge.

What does Easter hope say about war? Friends, we dare never forget that the Easter moment follows the Good Friday catastrophe. What happens on Good Friday reminds us that our human condition bears a tragic and persistent resemblance to our tendency to have a go at one another. If anything, the crucifixion of Jesus shows us we are capable of doing horrible things to one another. One only needs to watch the news on television, listen to the news on the radio, read the newspapers with their graphic pictures to be reminded again and again what we are capable of.

Calvary and those news broadcasts and the stories and pictures in the newspapers illustrate the contradiction we present to the kind and quality of life the God of Love wants for us. We need to be inspired, urged and even commanded to love one another; but – the gospel – and this is what makes it good news – the gospel recognizes that we don't always love one another. It understands that we stand in need of mercy, of forgiveness. The gospel offers Jesus who can take the worst we can dish out, yet who through love will not let us go, who will heal, reconcile and restore us to friendship with our God and with one another. What a revelation!. The gospel reveals one who weeps over our condition, who share it with us, whose grace lies in bearing the worst with us, carrying us through, granting us courage, trusting us, loving us, sticking with us, giving us another chance – and another and another and we muddle and stumble through the lies and the brutalities of the likes of Calvary. You see, the Easter moment that startling presence in the garden after the horror of Good Friday, confirms one who hangs in there with us through the dilemmas, the sickness, the blunders, the tragedy of our common life.

But more – and here lies our hope – encountering on Easter Day that transfigured Jesus, broken from the tomb, different, a new creation, we find ourselves grasped by the presence of a new community grounded in love, issuing in peace with justice, mutuality, and grace; a new community that we in faith – in faith because of this garden encounter – now know is real; a community that we in hope prepare ourselves patiently to invest in and work for; a reconciled, restored community in which we, in love, risk and offer ourselves in order to make it visible now in our families, our churches, our city, our world. In our time and always, an Easter challenge.

The gardener she believes. No, Mary, a new world of pardon and reconciliation; a new community embrace by divine mercy, renewed by your – by our – commitment, compassion, patience. A glorious, radiant, Easter challenge to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. May this be so. Amen.