

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019
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The First Church
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Fr. James Martin, a Roman Catholic priest, author of multiple books on religion and spirituality, and has a lively Twitter account, recently made a very powerful and provocative statement about Mary Magdalene from today's Gospel reading. He said that starting from the moment the Risen Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalen until she proclaimed, "I have seen the Lord." to the disciples, she alone was the Church on earth. In other words, during that time only Mary Magdalen knew the good news that Jesus was raised from the dead, and while she might not have developed a detailed, theologically astute, easily understandable explanation for what had happened, she was what the Church has always been intended to be: the unity of heaven and earth, of God's Kingdom fully and actually present in the world.

In some ways, one could look at today's Easter Gospel and see the beginning of the Christian faith, and how that faith is embodied in what we call the Church.

Before she became what Fr. Martin called the "Church on earth", Mary Magdalen was one of Jesus' disciples. Many people are surprised to learn that Jesus had more disciples than the twelve men so often mentioned in the Gospels, but today most historians, scholars, commentators and theologians agree Jesus' ministry was remarkable in that he was the first Jewish teacher, leader, and preacher to include women in his ministry. Not only was Mary a disciple, she was also one of the women who provided financial support for Jesus' ministry. We also learn in Luke's Gospel that Mary Magdalen had been very ill, not just physically but also spiritually and perhaps mentally ill and had been healed by Jesus. As the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry has said, Jesus set her free from whatever had held her back from living a life of wholeness. After she was healed, Mary used her freedom and chose to follow Jesus, which means she understood on a very personal, spiritual, and physical level the liberation Jesus was bringing into the world. No wonder she was such a devoted disciple. If you were with us on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, then you will remember from the Passion narratives that Mary Magdalen was not afraid to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. She had the courage to stay with him when most if not all the other disciples could not stand to be in the reality of his pain, humiliation, suffering and death.

So when Mary Magdalen went to the tomb early that morning, we know she wasn't expecting to encounter a Risen Jesus. We know that because she actually seemed to resist even entertaining the idea. After all, she had seen it all. She had been there when Jesus breathed his last. She had been there when his body was taken down from the cross. She had been there when his dead body was placed in that same tomb and the stone was rolled into place, sealing it shut. So it's no surprise that she was upset to find the tomb she saw closed now open. It's not surprising that she ran to tell the other disciples what she found. It's not surprising that once again, when Peter and the other disciple couldn't stay in that reality of the empty tomb, Mary did. She stayed, maybe to grieve, maybe to try and figure out what happened. Even when she didn't know what was going on, Mary Magdalen stayed with Jesus, or at least, stayed where she thought he should be, where she last saw him.

And when two angels appeared, one on each end of the place where Jesus' dead body should be, it's no wonder she answered their question about her tears by stating her situation. Many sermons and commentaries claim that Mary Magdalen was hysterical with grief on that first Easter morning, and that is why she answered the angels' question about why she was crying by saying her Lord was missing and she didn't know where to find him. That doesn't sound hysterical to me. It sounds like a person explaining reality. There she was in an empty tomb wondering where the body that was supposed to be there was. She seems to have a good grip on reality. At least, reality as she had always known it. But the presence of those angels might have alerted her to the new reality that had already come into being in the darkness of that tomb. A reality that is so big and so vital and so amazing, it can't be contained, it has to get out, it has to move around, to interact with the world in its new and mysterious and beautiful way. It was so close by, but Mary could have missed it if she had stayed focused on that tomb, on what she thought she knew.

But we know what happened next. The Risen Jesus himself repeated the angels' question, and when that failed to get her attention, the Risen Jesus called her by her name. For this new thing that was born in a tomb is not some random power floating around the universe. Resurrection life is Jesus himself with us in a new way, and this Risen Jesus knows his followers by name. This is a personal God we have, not a disconnected uninterested one. When he called her by name, and that is when Mary woke up to the new reality before her, realizing she already knows who is there in front of her. The one she was looking for found her

again. Perhaps in that moment she began to see in a deeper way the liberating new life Jesus brought to her is coming into the whole world. And to the one he had freed from whatever was keeping her from living a whole life, the Risen Jesus gave the command to go and tell the disciples about his resurrection. And, Fr. Martin believes, that is when the Church on earth was born in Mary Magdalen, because that is when one person embodied the joyful truth that Jesus is Risen. That is how Mary went from someone in need of healing and liberation to a devoted supporter and disciple of Jesus, to being the Church – the embodiment of the joy of the resurrection- of heaven here on earth.

It can be easy to forget what the Church is intended to be in our modern times. There are so many scandals, so much bad news, so many that twist the teachings of Jesus or ignore his example, or have simply forgone the joy of the resurrection and instead opt for power, prestige and popularity. Others can get stuck in that empty tomb, searching for the Jesus they are certain they know, the one they try to keep locked in history, locked in tradition, contained in the ways we've always done it. They forget that it isn't the historical Jesus we follow, or the past, or the way they met Jesus when they were younger. They forget what G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it has a God who knew the way out of the grave."

For many Christians and lovers of architecture, history, and art around the world, this past week has been dominated by the fire we all watched burn in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Instantly there was a strong outpouring of emotions all over the news, social media, and person to person conversations. People grieved openly by remembering when they had been at the beautiful, historic Cathedral. Others worried about the potential destruction of the relics, works of art, and historic organs housed in the cathedral. Others lamented for the people of Paris, and how that Cathedral is for them a monument that represents the city itself. A small minority of voices admitted regret that parts of the cathedral had been neglected. They, like Mary at the tomb, grieved for what they knew.

It wasn't long before other voices spoke up, voices much like the angels at the tomb asking about the purpose of the tears when they said whatever damage is suffered, the cathedral will be rebuilt, for that is what we followers of Jesus are about.

While I agree with those who speak of rebuilding, I was surprised at the number of people who resisted those comments, demanding instead people be allowed to grieve, for even if it is rebuilt, it won't be the same cathedral. While I do not want to rush anyone's journey of grief, because it is a journey, and grief takes time, we need to remember there is more to a cathedral or a church than our emotions. We can get too comfortable crying in the tomb and forget the purpose of a church, even a cathedral, isn't to preserve the past, it is to be Mary Magdalen: a place of unity between heaven and earth. Where anyone can see the Risen Christ. We have to remember Mary didn't find the Risen Jesus in the tomb. He was out and about, too joyful, too robust to stay contained, the embodiment of heaven on earth.

All churches, even we here at Church of the Good Shepherd, always need to remember why we are where we are. This building was built and the parish moved to this location by Bishop Hobson for the important purpose of being an active presence among the Ohio University community. Like Mary Magdalen, we are here to be the embodiment of the joy of the Risen Christ, and be Present with our neighbors as a bit of heaven on earth. Sometimes that looks like preparing and serving a free meal every Wednesday. Sometimes it looks like our Sunday worship services, where we welcome all people, letting them be here, receive the healing, liberating love of God in Christ through the sacrament of Holy Communion, or the beauty of music and liturgy and preaching. I have had students and faculty alike come to me and tell me how attending our worship services here at Church of the Good Shepherd have provided them with healing, liberating them from stress, anxiety, and even painful things done to them. Some of these folks stay, others leave to go and do what they feel God is calling them to, no longer held back from whatever was hurting them. That's being the Church as it was intended to be, the unity of heaven and earth.

This past fall, we at Church of the Good Shepherd found a new way to embody the joy of the Risen Christ when we put a life size replica of the TARDIS, the blue box that can travel through space and time from the long running BBC science fiction series Doctor Who, on the front steps of the church. While this might be a bit jarring for some, the TARDIS was greeted with open arms by the community. We talked with quite a few students, professors, families, even people from outside the OU community who stopped by to get a look at and take a selfie with the TARDIS. We learned from many of our visitors that they perceive the Church as corrupt, a bad influence on society, and harmful. But seeing the

TARDIS made them pause and rethink what they thought they knew about all churches. Because the TARDIS may be a secular symbol, but it is has become iconic and for fans of Doctor Who, the TARDIS is a symbol of hope, of help, and it is bigger on the inside. When it is doing what Mary Magdalen did on that first Easter morning, the same can be said of the Church. For many of our passersby, that TARDIS was the equivalent of the Risen Jesus calling Mary Magdalen by her name on Easter morning. It made them feel seen, accepted, and welcomed. I wrote an article about our semester with the TARDIS for our diocesan magazine; it got the attention of others, and was reprinted in a national Episcopal journal and distributed to every parish in the Episcopal Diocese of Rio Grande. Because it told the story of how this church is trying to live into the new life of the Risen Jesus, and that is the good news of great joy everyone is hungry and thirsty for. A little bit of heaven here on earth.

There are some churches that are hurting, that feel there is something prohibiting them from living into the new life of the resurrection. And there are plenty of individuals who have that in common with the church. Thank God we have today's Easter Gospel that is so full of hope for us all. Like Mary Magdalen, we all, no matter who we are as individuals or institutions, we can receive the healing love of the Risen Jesus, love that can set us free so we can see the Risen Lord and follow him wherever he leads so that our churches and our lives can be places of heaven here on earth. Alleluia.