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EASTER FROM A SKEPTIC'S POINT OF VIEW

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John 20.1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. She ran to tell Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, saying to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and the other disciple set out running together to the tomb but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. When he bent down to look in he saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. When Simon Peter reached the tomb, he went in. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple went in, and saw and believed what Mary had told them; for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and there she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

"The way in which a story is told, its angle of vision," writes Marilynne Robinson, "has everything to do with what it means, and is therefore, a matter of great interest to anyone who is attentive to the art of storytelling." (*Christian Century*, April 4, 2012, p.22) That John's story is told from Mary Magdalene's angle of vision enhances the interest of the story for me, for like her, I am a skeptic when it comes to this story. In fact, if we look carefully at the biblical narratives, all of the witnesses to the resurrection were skeptical of what really happened. They didn't believe—they couldn't believe it—because it was so outside the human experience it didn't even enter the realm of possibility.

Consider for a moment the value of skepticism. Columbus was skeptical of the popular belief that the earth was flat. Galileo was skeptical that the sun moved around the earth, suspicious of the conventional wisdom, based on biblical interpretation, that the earth was the center of our universe. Beethoven was skeptical that the keyboard instruments of his day had reached their full potential, so he wrote piano music that could only be properly played on instruments not yet in existence. Where

would the world be without these skeptics? A healthy dose of doubt is critical in discovering truth because popular opinion isn't always accurate. (Rick Brand in a sermon entitled "Back to Normal")

Less than forty-eight hours before this scene recorded in John's story, Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus murdered like a common criminal. She saw no evidence of a holy plan where this Jesus was going to be anyone's Messiah, including his own. She was numb from the echo of Jesus's grief in breathing his last words that even he believed that God had forsaken him. Neither knew of the surprise that God had waiting for them on the other side of the tomb. But the faith that ultimately developed among those who followed Jesus before his death had its origins in the skepticism they confessed at the tomb.

That's not surprising, really. Why would they be anything but dumbfounded by the reality of it? He didn't come to them in a blaze of holy light or in some miraculous séance. He appeared to them as any man who tended a fire by the seaside as they were out fishing; he appeared to them as any stranger walking the long road to Emmaus; he appeared to Mary as any common gardener. Why would she have even the remotest notion that this gardener was Jesus reincarnated?

Jesus, too, was skeptical about this whole series of events that led to his death. He went, as I believe, to Jerusalem, knowing he was courting death, because he was challenging the political and religious systems that oppress and marginalize. But he went believing God would vindicate him. He hoped God would intervene before his execution and bring the kingdom in all of its abundance. He died abandoned by his closest followers and seemingly by God. And as Martin Forward says "the resurrection was his unexpected vindication...and ours." (*Jesus, A Short Biography*, p. 94)

It took a long time for this idea of resurrection to sink in. It didn't happen as instantly as we might be lead to believe by reading this story, for such stories are parabolic composites of many experiences compressed for the sake of the narrative. Nevertheless, whenever it happened, within a week or within a month, the truth of it came to Mary when she recognized the voice that called her name, even if it was from a guy that looked like the gardener. It was confusing at best; who wouldn't feel that someone was messing with your mind? But Jesus didn't rebuke Mary for her error; in fact, he rather seems to enjoy the occasion of her surprise.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that the ways God appears in our lives are more often than not elusive and ambiguous. There is always room for doubt in order, perhaps, that there will always be room to breathe. There is so much in life that hides God and denies the very possibility of God, he confesses, that there are times when it is hard not to deny God altogether. Yet it is possible to have faith nonetheless. Faith **is** that Nonetheless, with a capital "N". I believe he's right, which is why I'm skeptical of any theology that has all the answers and a neatly packaged understanding of this event. It certainly wasn't neat and tidy in the biblical accounts.

From the angle of our vision, terrorist bombs in Belgium, Iraq, and Nigeria seriously threaten to undermine and negate the sense of new life. When states within our own country pass laws that legalize discrimination, it is easy to be skeptical of the reality of Easter resurrection. But it is when I see how such tragedies galvanize people all over the world, and I hear the voice of truth as it gathers itself up in a display of unwavering righteous love calling from the mouth of a common gardener or an advocate for the oppressed that I find hope of resurrection.

And I recall the stories of my Jewish friends telling of Christians who harbored their relatives during the Holocaust to the potential peril of both, and I recognize the voice of the resurrected Christ who called his disciples to take risks for the good of others. I hear stories of people saved from emotional and financial bankruptcy because affordable health care was available in their catastrophic illness, and I recognize the voice of a Messiah in an hourly-wage laborer. I hear accounts of people delivered from bankruptcy because friends gathered together to pay their rent when they couldn't pay it themselves and I hear Christ's still, small voice. I know Christians who stand in solidarity with Muslim sisters and brothers, and I catch a glimpse of the hope of an empty tomb. When I see the Pope washing the feet of immigrants, I see the risen Christ. When we work side by side with Sikhs and Buddhists, Muslims, humanists and atheists, people of all races and all genders and orientations, not to convince each other of our truth but to join hands for each other's well-being, then I begin to get a sense of the unbelievable power in Easter's new life. We may be skeptical because our human mind can't comprehend such things, but we must never underestimate the place where we are and the people we encounter; they may be the garden of the empty tomb and the gardener calling our name. (Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*)

It was Easter week one hundred years ago in April, 1916 when a small group of Irish citizens launched what is known as the Easter Uprising in an attempt to overthrow 700 years of British rule. After taking control of several public buildings, they declared their independence, and were able for several days to withstand the onslaught of thousands of British troops hell-bent on quashing the rebels. The uprising failed and the leaders executed; they died thinking their efforts in vain. Little could they know that their efforts had sparked within the nation a passion that would result in Irish freedom within 6 short years. In 1922, the Irish Republic would be a reality. It is a story of defeat and new life. It is a story to remind us that we can't have Easter without Good Friday. It is a story lived out in countless ways each day when new life rises up from what has died, and resurrection hope blossoms amid the unknowing and the unbelievable.

Like Mary Magdalene and Peter and the other disciple, we paradoxically find the possibility of new life at the moment of our crisis. We can't imagine that we could survive. We can't understand how anything good could come of the tragedy; we can't grasp the transforming power of a God who surprises us with life. It matters not how many angels tell us he's risen, or how much traditional theology may try to convince us it's true, we're suspicious. And rightly so until such time as we experience it ourselves when we meet the gardener out mowing the grass. We are skeptics until it becomes our story. And often it becomes our story because we are skeptics. And by faith we learn to live into it even when we can't quite believe it.

We rejoice that beyond our tendency toward disbelief is a capacity to be captured by faith. We can gladly confess our surprise that a cross of execution has become our symbol of liberation; that an empty tomb has served to point to the fullness of life; and the voice of a gardener calling our name gives us joy to say amen.

--Gary L. McCann