

The readings this Lenten season have been full of examples of God's initiative at work through the unexpected and about God's promise of new life. We heard about Nicodemus – Pharisee, teacher of Israel, influential. He took Jesus literally when Jesus suggested he could be born anew.

There was the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well – doubly cursed by gender and nationality. After the chat she and Jesus have she returns to her village to proclaim that she has met the Messiah.

Finally, there was the blind beggar – condemned by the Pharisees, doubted by his neighbors, dismissed by his parents. During a confrontation with the Pharisees the blind man whose sight had been restored by Jesus tells his accusers that “if this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” After encountering Jesus again, he proclaims, “Lord, I believe.”

What we find this Easter Day is yet another example of the unexpected. We find it in the unnamed disciple who outruns Peter to Jesus' grave and who – we are told in today's reading – enters the tomb, sees the burial garment and believes. What he believes we are not quite certain.

Then we have Peter who, in spite of having denied Jesus three times, is still clearly the leader of the disciples. We know this because it is to Peter that our third unexpected messenger comes with news that Jesus' tomb is empty.

That person, of course is Mary Magdalene. She is the first apostle. It is she who announces the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the other disciples making her the apostle to the apostles.

Mary Magdalene first appears in John's gospel at the foot of the cross with the other Marys. He tells us nothing about her. What we know about Mary Magdalene we learn in the other gospels.

She is mentioned first in every listing of the female disciples of Jesus Christ that are found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In male fantasies and in the tradition of the church she is portrayed as unmarried, young, and provocative. She has an unjustified and scripturally unsubstantiated reputation as a prostitute.

Perhaps, however, she was already old by ancient mid-East standards, and had a marriage behind her. She seems to have been the leader of a group of women who “followed” and “served” Jesus constantly from the beginning of his ministry in Galilee to his death, and beyond.

Mary Magdalene had leadership qualities and was one of many women who contributed from their own means to the ministry of Jesus. She was also among a smaller group of women who had been healed by Jesus.¹

All four gospels put her at the foot of the cross as a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus. She is the first to see the empty tomb – as John tells us. The risen Jesus appears to her first and talks of his impending ascension. She is the one Jesus sends to the disciples to give them that news.

It is dark when Mary returns to the tomb where she had helped to bury Jesus. She finds that the stone used to close the cave-like tomb has been removed. Such a feat would not have been accomplished by a person acting alone because of the shear weight of the stone. She fears the grave has been robbed, a common occurrence in Jesus' time.

Mary Magdalene runs to Peter and the other disciple. We can imagine that aside from being fearful she is also panting as she tells them that Jesus' body is gone and "we do not know where they have laid him."

Peter and the other disciple must see for themselves so they run to the tomb, which the other disciple reaches first. He looks into the tomb and sees the linen wrappings that Jesus had been buried in but he does not enter the tomb.

Peter arrives and I can picture him elbowing his way past the other disciple as he rushes into the tomb. He also sees the grave wrappings and the cloth that had been covering Jesus' head. It is not laying with the wrappings, but is rolled up neatly in a separate place in the tomb.

Now that is a little creepy, if you ask me. After all, grave robbers would not take the time to do such a thing. Who would be that fastidious?

The other disciple enters the tomb, sees, and believes – what we are not exactly sure because Jews of that day did not believe in the resurrection of the body. The two men return to their homes leaving Mary alone outside the tomb, where she is crying. John tells us that she bends over to look inside the tomb.

She sees two angels donned in white and sitting where Jesus' body had lain – one at the head; the other at the foot. Mary could have sworn she had not seen them just a little earlier. Peter and the other disciple did not say anything about angels. Mary knew that if Peter had seen such a thing the whole world would hear about it. He probably would have high-tailed it out of the tomb with a terrified look on his face.

So where did the angels come from? Who are they?

The angels ask Mary why she is crying. "They have taken away my Lord," she replies, "and I do not know where they have laid him."

She turns around and someone else who previously was not there materializes.

Things are getting curiouser and curiouser. What kind of an Easter story is this, anyway?

It is Jesus she sees, but she does not know it is him. And there is that question again. “Why are you weeping?” Then he asks her who she is looking for.

Thinking that Jesus is the gardener, she asks that if he has carried Jesus away she would like to know – please – where he is so that she can retrieve the body. If he did something with Jesus his secret is safe with her. Just tell her where the body is.

Then Jesus speaks her name – Mary – and she knows instantly that she is not talking to the gardener. She almost shrieks it. Teacher! We can infer from what Jesus says to her that she touches him in some way. I do not know if folks hugged in those days but I can see Mary putting her arms around him so glad and relieved and astounded is she to see him. What she had thought was lost is now found.

Mary Magdalene had been cured of some sort of mental illness by Jesus and since that time she had been utterly devoted to him. She had followed him throughout his ministry. She had supported him in whatever way she could. She was tenacious, and she never doubted Jesus.

Without him her life would serve lose its purpose. Mary wants to suspend this moment indefinitely. She does not want Jesus leaving her – again.

But Jesus tells her, “Do not hold on to me . . .” Perhaps “cling” is a better word, Tom Wright notes. In his commentary on the Gospel of John he writes that such was likely Jesus’ way of saying “that the new relationship with him was not going to be like the old one. He wouldn’t be going around Galilee and Judaea any more, walking the lanes with them, sharing regular meals, discussing, talking, praying. They would see him now and then, but soon it would be time for him to ‘go to the father’, as he had said over and over . . .”²

Jesus gives Mary Magdalene one last job – actually it is her first job in the new life that is hers. She is to report his appearance and his imminent ascension to the group of disciples.

My friends, on this Easter Day – this day of profound joy – let us be prepared to be the unexpected one. Let us be prepared as Mary Magdalene was to proclaim the transforming power and presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

The resurrection of Jesus and the joy of Easter are ours to embrace on this day and for all our days. The power and presence of Jesus Christ changes the quality of everything we see and say and know, just as it did for Mary Magdalene. We are empowered as Mary was to go tell someone . . . anyone . . . everyone . . .

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed!

¹ Paul Achtemeier, editor. *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1996), p.657.

² Tom Wright. *John for Everyone – Part Two* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 147.

Acts 10.34-43; Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3.1-4; John 20.1-18

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