

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 9, 2023 // Easter Day, Year A

The Gospel: 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. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. 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, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 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 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 are you looking for?" 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!" (which means Teacher). 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.

Background and general observations

It's probably a good idea for us to take stock of the fact that the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection vary significantly in their details. For example, how many women were there? How many angels? What was the message to those who encounter the empty tomb? Was Jesus himself there, or not?

Such variations in the telling of the Easter story are disturbing to some. If you are counting on the Gospel accounts serving as reliable, historical accounts about precisely what happened when, then you might find the variations unsettling. But if you think of the Gospel accounts as being different ways of communicating the same, extraordinary truth, that Jesus was raised from the dead, then you might find the variations interesting and even helpful in sorting out what this might mean for you and your life.

Some of the differences in detail might reveal different understandings of the same truth and experience. After all, each of us brings different needs, insights, and ways of perceiving to our experiences, so our way of describing the same experiences will understandably differ. And much has been made over the centuries of different literary allusions in the Gospel accounts. For example, in John's account, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Is this an allusion to that original garden, the Garden of Eden, and the effect the resurrection has of restoring humanity to our intended relationship with God? Is it an allusion to a parable Jesus told about the

patient gardener who forestalls judgment? You can see how various interpretations like this might reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the Gospel narrative itself.

It is also interesting to note in John's account that those who look inside the tomb seem to see different things. Peter and "the other disciple" both see grave clothes, and Peter, at least, sees the cloth that had covered Jesus' head "rolled up in a place by itself." (The reference to the head cloth could be an allusion to the veil which Moses would remove when he entered into the presence of God—perhaps we are being shown a clue that Jesus has entered into God's presence?) After the men see these things, they return to their homes. Mary, on the other hand, sees two angels and speaks with them. Then, Mary turns around and sees a person she believes to be the gardener but whom she recognizes as Jesus when he speaks her name. Did the angels suddenly appear after the disciples left? Or, had the angels been there, and the disciples simply were not able to see them? What keeps us from seeing divine activity in our lives, and what allows us to see?

We might also wonder about Mary mistaking Jesus for a gardener. Do we similarly mistake or overlook the presence of Jesus, the presence of God, in our lives today? What allows us to see the deepest truths of our lives more clearly, and what blinds us to such truths?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The first witnesses at the tomb on Easter Day see and experience different things. Although the men seem to see only grave clothes, Mary sees angels. Then, when she turns around, she sees one whom she supposes is a gardener. When he speaks her name, however, the gardener turns out to be Jesus himself. It is a strange scene—you might think that Mary would recognize instantly the one whom she knew and loved.

One interpretation of these varying perceptions and *mis*perceptions is that we are dealing here with human beings encountering divine reality, and this requires the "eyes of our faith" to adjust. Some might see gradually, and others might not see at all.

What do you know from your own experience about the difficulty of perceiving the presence and activity of God in your life? When have you, like Mary, been slower to recognize the presence of the divine? Consider what allows you to see clearly and what prohibits your clarity.

2. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'"

Have you ever experienced God "calling you by name"?

Have you ever had an experience of being "known," in the most intimate way, by God? Perhaps God did not call you by name but called you in some other way.

In this version, there is an exclamation point after Mary's name and she, in turn, exclaims, "Rabbouni!" Imagine how Jesus spoke—or exclaimed—Mary's name...the tone and volume of his voice...the sharpness or softness of his voice.

And then imagine how Mary's voice may have sounded—was it alarm? fear? relief?

If you are inclined, sit quietly, close your eyes, and imagine Jesus speaking, even exclaiming, your name.

3. "Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold onto me.'"

What do you know about trying to "hold onto" God, as opposed to "being held" by God?

4. Read these final lines of a poem, "Not darkness but twilight," by the poet R.S. Thomas, an Anglican priest from Wales:

... There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.

- a. What kinds of questions do you think might be included in "the old questions" the poet mentions?
- b. Remembering that Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the other disciple arrive at the tomb "while it was still dark," and knowing what you know about the use of darkness and light as metaphors for blindness and fear, knowledge and wisdom, what do you make of their discovery at the tomb in darkness, as opposed to broad daylight?
- c. How do you respond to R.S. Thomas' title—"Not darkness but twilight"—as it informs his image of "love's risen body"? How does twilight speak to Jesus' presence at this moment—after his death, but before his ascension?
- d. Using twilight—literally, "of two lights" or "between lights"—as a lens for thinking about this passage, how might you articulate the message of Easter, of resurrection and truth?