

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on April 12, 2020 (Easter)

This is a love story.

We catch only fragments of the women in the Gospels-- Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Joanna, Salome, and the sisters Mary and Martha. But it's clear that they love Jesus. They are the ones who finance his movement, host him in their homes, serve him at their tables, anoint his head and wash his feet. They are the ones who take care of him.

Aside from Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene is mentioned the most. We are told that Jesus heals her from possession by demons. She is devoted to Jesus. She leaves behind her home in Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and gives her whole life to following him.

When Jesus is arrested and tried, all of the disciples flee, fearful for their own lives. Not Mary. Her love for Jesus, her grief at his arrest, her worry about what will happen to him crowd out her fear. I imagine that she waits outside Pilate's headquarters, anxious about what will happen. And when Jesus emerges, under the guard of the soldiers, weak, exhausted, and bearing the marks of his beating, Mary will not leave him. Along with the other women, she stays with him. She aches as he is nailed to the cross. She keeps vigil with him, right at the foot of the cross, hour after agonizing hour. She is there with him as he takes his last breath. I imagine that, while Joseph seeks permission to bury him, she cannot bear to leave him alone. That she is there when Joseph and Nicodemus take down his body with as much dignity as they muster, and again as they roll the stone in front of the tomb.

And then the Sabbath, the day of rest, begins. So she tears herself away from the tomb and returns to the place she is staying. There, she waits. What else would she do? The one she loves is gone. Her sense of meaning and purpose, her dreams and hopes, have been shattered. Maybe she sleeps; or the scenes she's just witness and her sorrow keep her awake.

Very early on Sunday morning, while it is still dark, Mary walks through the dark, quiet streets of Jerusalem to the tomb. When she arrives, she finds that the stone has been taken away, along with his body. She is devastated. The one thing she had left is gone.

Jesus' heart breaks for Mary. We know this because, throughout his passion, throughout the very worst moments of his life, as Jesus is present to his own pain, he is also attentive to what's happening for the people around him. He anticipates the grief and the guilt his disciples will feel, and uses his final hours to tell them that he knows what will happen, and to assure them that he still loves them. He announces his forthcoming betrayal, and then offers the disciples his body and blood. He predicts the disciples' desertion, and then tells them that he will meet them after he is risen in Galilee. In the very moment of his betrayal, he calls Judas his friend, insisting that their relationship endures. He asks his mother and the beloved disciple to be family to each other when he is not there to be family to them. He even asks God's forgiveness on the ones who crucify him.

Jesus' whole life has been compassion incarnate. He has never been interested in demonstrating power for its own sake. Every word, every healing, every deed of power, is an outgrowth of his compassion. He heals people because they are hurting. He feeds people because they are hungry. He walks on water to be with the disciples in their terrible fear. He raises people because he sees the grief of those who love them.

The resurrection is no different. For all that it breaks open, all that it makes possible, the resurrection is an outgrowth of Jesus' desire to be with the people he loves in their time of need. Jesus' heart breaks for Mary, and he wants nothing more to be with her in her anguish. Jesus will not let anything, not even death, stop him. He appears outside of the tomb and asks her, with such tenderness, *Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?* And when she cannot recognize him through her tears and desperation, he calls her by name.

This is a love story. It is the story of Jesus' love for Mary. It is the story of his love for his mother, for his disciples, for Judas and Peter. It is the story of his compassion for each of them in their grief and fear and regret. It is the story of his refusal to let anything--- even abandonment, even betrayal, even sin, even death---stand in the way of his love, of his desire to be with them.

We tell the story together today, that beautiful patchwork of voices standing in for all of our voices, because it is *our* story, too. Jesus' love for you, and for the people you love, is as individual and as personal and as intimate as it was for Mary Magdalene. And Jesus will not let anything get in the way of that love. Not sin. Not fear. Not the lies that say you are unworthy, or the tears that prevent you from seeing him. Not your confusion or doubt. Not even death.

In his final words to Mary, Jesus says, don't hold on to me. That's because she doesn't have to. Just hours before his death, Jesus told his disciples, "I will come and again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." That is what Jesus has just done. Jesus has come to her, has already taken her to himself, holding *her* in the bonds of a love that has proven stronger than death. And Jesus comes to *us*, before we can even ask. In this moment, when things are crumbling around us, when so much is uncertain, Jesus holds us to him and to each other in the bonds of a love that cannot be broken, a love that endures. The resurrection is for you. It has already been done for you. All that remains is greet the one who has come to us, the one who holds us, and to tell the others what he has done.

This is a love story. This story is your story, and this love is for you.