

“I Have Seen the Lord”

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” According to the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene plays a very important role in the Easter story. She was the first to come to the tomb, alone, while it was still dark, when everything was silent as death, when there was no light in the world. Mary was not outwardly afraid, unlike Joseph of Arimathea, who asked Pilate to let him secretly take away the body of Jesus because of his fear of the Jewish leaders. She did not stay home, unlike the other disciples, who hid in the safest places they could find. Mary came to search for the body of Christ. Even after she saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb, thinking that someone stole Jesus’ body, she kept searching here and there, finally bending over to look into the tomb. Even in her despair, even with the memory of her friend and teacher’s merciless death etched on her brain, Mary persisted in her search – she was tired, heartsore, weeping with frustration and sadness, when she was startled by the presence of a stranger. She went to him and asked, “Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” She did not recognize Jesus who was speaking with her until he called her by name. Jesus said to her, “Mary”, like the good shepherd who calls his own sheep by name. And she turned and said to him, “Rabbouni!” a form of endearment for “rabbi,” teacher or master, like a sheep responding to the voice of the good shepherd. Her sorrow turned into joy.

This is exactly what Jesus was talking about at the last supper with his friends. He says, in John 16:20-24, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

Mary Magdalene was a true disciple, because she was, according to John, the only disciple who put the teacher’s words into action; she wept and mourned as so many wept and mourned, but she went beyond that sorrow.

Everyone else thought, “It’s over, finished – what started in joy has ended in tears.” And they made plans to escape Jerusalem, go back to whatever they had left of their old lives. Mary, however, kept searching, looking for Jesus, going so far as to ask for help from a complete stranger. She searched for Jesus, she asked for Jesus constantly and fearlessly. And just as Jesus promised, her heart rejoiced with a joy that no one could take from her, and she received what she asked for. Moreover, she was commissioned by Jesus to announce to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”.

Our Easter story began not with those who returned to their homes but with the one who stayed close to Jesus when everything seemed finished. Mary’s personal relationship with Jesus is evident in this story, and it is affirmed when Jesus calls her by name. And that relationship grows stronger and deeper as Jesus sends Mary to her community to tell them what she saw and what she was told. She reminds us of the Samaritan woman at the well. She did not recognize Christ at first, but as their conversation went deeper she realized that she was speaking with the one she and her community had been waiting for. So the Samaritan woman went back to her community to say “Come and see”. Just like her, Mary becomes a messenger, an Easter apostle for Jesus.

We, our church and our community, need such messengers, who never give up, even when things seem hopeless, and come back to share God’s work with our people. Our Christ needs such messengers who pass his messages, as they are, on to his people to give them life abundantly. (John 10:10) Such messengers always need to stay connected to both Christ and the community. Mary Magdalene’s courage, her love for Jesus and her caring for her community are an example to all of us. Whether you are young or old, newcomer or long-time member, conservative or liberal, progressive or traditional, male or female, attend regularly or seldom, you are called to announce the risen Christ to the world. So, my sisters and brothers in Christ, hang in there. Stay close to Jesus. And when you hear Jesus calling you by name, don’t be surprised, but turn to him and listen. Stay close to your family, your church and your community, passing on what Christ is still speaking to the world, until everybody can say for themselves, “I have seen the Lord”.