

Would She Have Left?

I was removing the undergrowth of dead brush and trees from inside the large fenced-in pen that used to hold our goats totally intent on cleaning out this area that had been ignored for too long. It was Easter Saturday, and for some reason I found myself lost in thoughts of this day, that brief moment in time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, a time between death and life.

Easter marking the beginning of Spring and with it comes the longer days filled with sunshine. Easter, a time that once would have found me in Church, wearing my Sunday best, participating in familiar rituals and reading the scriptures followed by the tradition of family gatherings. But those days were long ago, truly missed but for another time.

Yet I could not escape wondering about the mysteries of this celebration. Strange thoughts slipped through my mind as I continued my chores of pulling weeds, picking up limbs and dumping taking atop a pile of dead trees that waited to be burned. I poured rainwater out of old buckets and carried them to the loafing shed pausing for a moment to stand inside, cooled by its shade. The sheet metal walls made a tinny sound as a slight breeze drifted through small openings set high near its slanted roof. The damp dirt floor, void of weeds or grass, added to the solemn darkness. I scanned the vacant space fighting memories of the ill-fated goats, once alive and frisky their baaing heard across the miles of pasture, now silent. Killed in a vicious attack of wild dogs, their tiny horns and hooves were no defense. Helpless, surrendering to the slaughter. All gone.

Was it the shed's darkness or its emptiness or the sad memories that reminded me of a tomb? Why was I pondering the crucifixion in such a mundane surrounding doing such dirty physical work? Cleaning out a goat pen and thinking of the holiest of times. How preposterous.

As I tried to concentrate on the work at hand, my mind could not escape thoughts of Easter and at one point I recalled the story Cynthia Bourgeault told of being in France during Easter week and hearing a verse from the Passion story as if for the first time. It was immediately following the familiar story of Joseph of Arimathea asking for the body of Jesus to take to an unused tomb.

The verse that followed, Mathew 27:61, included the words that caught her attention. Surely Cynthia had heard them before—she must have, being an Episcopal priest she had presided over many Good Friday liturgies.

The verse was: *And Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained standing there in front of the tomb.* With those words came Cynthia's wonderings. Had Mary stood there through the entire time Jesus was being laid to rest? Maybe she never left; there was nothing in the scripture that said she did. What if she had kept vigil throughout the night?

I dwelled in musings of my own: What would the Magdalene have thought about? What would she have done? Did she sit quietly in meditation, pace in frustration, or cry inconsolably from grief?

Why didn't we know more? Or did we?

The more I thought about the events from Friday afternoon until Sunday morning, the more curious I became about the movements of this woman called the Magdalene. Had she indeed stayed the entire night and would she have sat there through the entire next day, the Sabbath, which Jewish law required that she 'rest?' Would sitting near the tomb have equated to rest and have allowed her to observe her traditions?

Her presence, her staying at the tomb, made sense to me. Where else would she have gone?

I am not speaking in terms of a woman so paralyzed by grief over her beloved that she couldn't leave, or a student standing sentinel for a master out of some sort of sense of duty.

While she must have been devastated and may not have wanted to be away from him, she literally had nowhere else to go. We all know that she would not have been able to find the disciples. Those were the same men that --until that day -- she had spent months maybe years with as they followed the Teacher. But now those men were gone, in hiding, cowering in their fear.

The other Mary or Salome had undoubtedly taken the Mother Mary off to some safe place. For the Magdalene to have joined them doesn't resonate. Being with those women, numb with grief, attempting to comfort each other simply didn't fit. Not for this woman. Not for the person who was in all truth 'second in command' to the leader—the one now dead. Not for someone whose name is repeated in all Gospels and continually linked to Jesus. She would have stayed near the leader but unlike any other 'second in command,' as a woman she posed no threat and the soldiers ignored her.

And as a Second in Command there was information and instruction only she would have been privy to—that acknowledgement—always present yet obscure, is one of the indicators about her real role. There is no doubt that she needed to know 'where' the tomb was located and the 'nonchalant' tone of this verse is deceiving. She follows Joseph, one of the secret admirers, Joseph, a man of wealth, Joseph, who had anointed and wrapped the body in spices and linen and laid it gently in the tomb. Joseph had a plan and she was there, among the inner circle.

Certainly, the debate is valid and continues concerning the status of the Magdalene in relationship to Jesus. She returns following the Sabbath for the purpose of attending to an appropriate burial of Jesus, to perform a ritual, involving touching a dead body, a taboo act for anyone other than a member of the immediate family. Yes as I listen to the story and try to follow the sequence (though admittedly some events simply don't

logically follow each other), I realized that she is there for far more than a ritual.

It is as if she were 'required' to return to the rock-hewn tomb.

My thoughts moved away from the familiar Gospel stories to the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, a sacred scripture that is becoming well known to scholars and seekers alike. While it isn't a part of the canonical gospels it resonates for reasons most don't understand. As more information unearths around its beginnings and validity, it is on a course to bring to us a deeper understanding of early Christianity and this man called Jesus.

Within its short pages is a section known as the Ascent of the Soul, a section scholars have long debated, a section that is fragmented, disjointed and mystical.

It starts with Peter saying to Mary, "*Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than other women.*" (It always struck me odd that he said 'other women' instead of saying "all others" thereby implying both men and women especially considering that he then acknowledges that she has heard things from Jesus which they, the men, have not.) He implores her to: *Tell us the words of the Savior which you have in mind since you know them; and we do not, nor have we heard of them.*"

Mary answered and said, "*What is hidden from you I will impart to you.*" Mary then tells them of seeing a vision and asking Jesus: *'Lord, the mind which sees the vision, does it see it through the soul or through the spirit?'* The Savior answered and said, *'It sees neither through the soul nor through the spirit, but the nous (mind), which is between the two, which sees the vision, and it is...'*"

Here the reading stops and missing segments now lost forever leave a terrible gap. The story picks back up with a strange and almost obscure dialogue between the Soul and the seven powers during some kind of ascent by the Soul.

Is this the vision Mary spoke of? Is she witnessing an ascent of a soul from death to its new state as it climbs to heaven? Is she speaking of her own soul? Or does the soul's voice belong to Jesus telling in his own words what happened when he went down into hell and on the third day ascended.

It is more believable to me that she was actually 'there' with him, experiencing each level of the ascent with him, hearing the challenges and the Soul's responses.

At each level of the ascent another challenge is hurled and an equally profound response is given. *...and Desire said, 'I did not see you descend; but now I see you rising. Why do you speak falsely, when you belong to me?'* The Soul answered and said, *'I saw you, but you did not see me or recognize me; I served you as a garment and you did not recognize me.'*

The Soul's response is unerringly familiar. So often I have heard that our body is only the garment or a container for our soul; we human beings are so much more than this outer shell and the time will come when we shed it.

The Ascent continues with: After it (the Soul) had said this, it went joyfully and gladly away. Again, it came to the third power, Ignorance. This power questioned the soul: *"Whither are you going? You were bound in wickedness, you were bound indeed."* And the soul said, *'Why do you judge me, when I judged not? I was bound, though I did not bind. I was not recognized, but I recognized that all will go free, things both earthly and heavenly.'*

Again, the familiar words, echoing the traditional teaching of 'Judge not, lest ye be judged' and the many times Jesus referenced what was needed to being free.

Finally: *After the soul had left the third power behind, it rose upward, and saw the fourth power, which had seven forms. The first form is*

darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth the arousing of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the wisdom of the folly of the flesh, the seventh is wrathful wisdom.

Each 'power' lobes an accusation to which the soul responds, sometimes almost lovingly and then continues its journey to another higher level, until at last reaching a state of rest.

Was the Magdalene somehow present during this ascent? The descriptions are so vivid, almost too personal. How else could she have so clearly told of this experience? Is she once again the only eyewitness to an event so profound it will never be repeated?

As she had stayed near him watching from the foot of the cross, seeing him take his last breath and hearing the Centurion announce that "Surely this was the Son of God." As she had followed Joseph and the others while they carried his lifeless body and laid it inside the tomb. As she stood outside the tomb while the rock was rolled across the opening-- forever sealing it and closing his body off from the world and her from him. She had no choice, she had to be present.

Would she have stayed near him outside the tomb or was some part of her actually standing side by side with him on this journey? Was she seeing what he saw, hearing what he heard, as he made his decent into death and then rose again? Was she as close as any human being could be to another when one was dead and the other among the living and breathing?

He had already explained this to her, had he not? She stood within the nous, she was with him and as he affirmed: *Blessed are you, Mary, for even when seeing the vision, you did not waver.*

She who had seen his death in such an intimate way, the death of a man she had walked with through miles of countryside, listened to for hours, questioned his teachings when no others dared or could even comprehend what he was saying; she could not have left.

She who “understood all,” who was the only eyewitness to the resurrection, was also the first to be given the instructions from Jesus to “Go tell the good news!” He had risen, he had risen indeed! In her actions and in her unwavering faith and belief, she rightfully earned the title of Apostle to the Apostles.

She had known him in life and in death and in life again. She had been with him in that sacred time between. He was her teacher, her guide, her love, so yes, she would have stayed, throughout that long night and beyond.

I believe that even now, she has not left him ... as he has not left us.

God is closer to you than your breath.

Rumi

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