

Into the Mystery - RELEASED 4-4-10

Easter Sunday

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

John 20:1-18

²⁰Early 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. ²So 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." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.'" ¹⁸ 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.

As a butterfly soared overhead, one caterpillar said to the other, "You'll never get me up in one of those things." Yet for every caterpillar the time comes when the urge to eat and grow diminishes, and that creature instinctively begins to form a chrysalis around itself. The chrysalis hardens and you look at that shell and think for all the world that the caterpillar is dead. You may as well toss it out and have a little funeral for the poor thing.

But one spring morning the life inside the chrysalis begins to writhe, the top cracks open, and a beautifully-formed butterfly

emerges from its shell. It is released from that which encased it, and is now free. For hours it may stand stretching and drying its wings, moving them slowly up and down, up and down. And then, before you know it, the butterfly glides aloft, effortlessly riding the currents of the air, alighting on flower after gorgeous flower, as if to show off its vivid colors to the bright blossoms. I imagine the release of the Goldenrod Gall Fly may be similar.

Somehow, the miracle of the butterfly never loses its fascination for us; perhaps because the butterfly is a living parable of the promise of resurrection; the transformation from one form of life to another; the release from that which holds on and binds us to the freedom to soar to new heights. On Easter we celebrate that in Christ, we are released from those cocoons, those chains, those prison doors, yes, even those tombs which hold us back from experiencing the fullness of life God gives. On Easter we proclaim, "Christ is Risen!" God's power of love and life are stronger than any human construction that might try to overcome it.

There are four different gospel accounts of the Easter story. Today, we heard John's version which is somewhat unique from the others. John's story begins and ends with Mary Magdalene, who goes to Jesus' tomb while it is still dark and ends up telling the other disciples what she has seen and heard. There is no mention of any of the other women - only Mary Magdalene; and only Peter and another disciple appear at the tomb to find out if what Mary says is true. This resurrection account really rests on Mary.

Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' faithful followers. She is referred to in early Christian writings as "the apostle to the apostles." By every gospel account, she was the first to encounter the resurrected Christ. In apocryphal texts, she is portrayed as a visionary and leader of the early movement, who was loved by Jesus more than the other disciples.

Mary had experienced first hand Jesus' healing power which transformed her life. So she followed him and witnessed as he healed others. She ate with him and learned from Jesus as he shared

parables and stories and wisdom sayings. Mary was encouraged and filled with hope as she continued to experience God's goodness and love embodied in this one called Jesus. Jesus, who spoke of how in God's eyes, the last shall be first, the least shall be greatest, the lost shall be found; who said that the whole of the law and prophets could be summed up in this: "that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself." Mary was amazed at Jesus' respect for women and others on the margins of society. Surely he was the Promised One of God sent to save the people and to show them God's ways. She believed, and was filled with hope now that Jesus was among them - a living, breathing sign of God's love breaking through the barriers of the political and religious establishments that seemed to bind people, as well as breaking through the physical, emotional, and self-imposed chains that bind. The future looked bright! God is among us! Hosanna!

But something happened. Things went terribly wrong. An unraveling began. And this faithful follower of Jesus, filled with hope

and promise watched as Jesus was arrested, tried, and flogged. Mary was right there and watched as Jesus was nailed to a cross. She was there when he took his last breath. And she watched as Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' body in the tomb and rolled a great stone over the door sealing in not only the body of her beloved teacher and friend, but also her hopes and dreams as well.

And so it is that Mary heads back to that tomb in the darkness of the predawn hours. John doesn't tell us why Mary decided to go to the tomb in the dark, but when she arrives, she sees that the stone had been removed from the entrance and she suspects the worst. So she runs and tells Peter and another disciple that someone had taken Jesus from the tomb and she knew not where he'd been taken. Peter and the other disciple take off on a race to the tomb and discover that Mary is right. Jesus' body is gone... only grave clothes remain in its place - kind of like an empty chrysalis deserted by a butterfly released to soar free. But the disciples don't really get what is going on. And Mary remains there at the tomb, weeping, grieving, not only has her dear

friend died, her hope has died and his body has been defiled.

Confused, bereaved, weeping, Mary encounters angels and then Jesus asking why she is weeping and she repeats, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." It is important to note that Mary does not recognize Jesus. What has risen is not the same as what was buried. It is only when Jesus calls her name, "Mary!" that she recognizes who it is. Now you'd think there would be this heart-warming moment of embrace here, but Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me..."

After the resurrection, things do not return to normal. That's the good news. It is basic to everything else the New Testament proclaims. Jesus cannot be contained by death and a tomb. And Jesus' disciples cannot hold on to him as they might have. Things have changed, a power has been released that is hope-filled and promise-filled. It is the power of life that lives on in those who follow Jesus. Or, as the Apostle Paul says it, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:19b) The spirit of Christ has been

released in the world and lives through us. That is why it is futile to look for Jesus in the tomb. That is the hope of the resurrection.

Every day can be Easter. Every day, we choose whether we go to the tomb, looking for the living among the dead; grieving for what has been and is no longer, defeated, unable to see what is right in front of us.

Every day, we choose whether we will allow the spirit of the risen Christ to release us from old habits, old ways of thinking, destructive behaviors and attitudes, so that resurrection hope and new life might flow through us.

You see, the truth of Jesus life was not bound by his body and his earthly existence. So hope didn't die on the cross. Jesus tells Mary, "Don't hold on to me." We tend to want to hold on to what we can feel and touch. We tend not to recognize Christ unless it fits our own experience and how we see the world. But the power of the resurrection is that God, in Christ, cannot be pinned down or boxed up, but must be released into the world that God's light may shine, that love would soar, that abundant life might take hold here and now in this

life, the one lived not from fear, but love, not from scarcity, but abundance, not from despair, but hope. The Easter hope is not so much about where we will go when we die as it is how we will live while we still have breath, as followers of the one who was willing to give his life for the sake of life, in love. That love is what has the power to transform our lives and make us new. That love is what has the power to release us from the tombs that hold us. Christ is risen! Shout Hosanna!"

Amen.