

Sunday, April 24, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – Easter Sunday

During my oral examination for ordination I was asked, “Who was Jesus’ favorite disciple.”

I responded, “Mary Magdalene.”

People laughed, but I was serious. Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the cross on Friday and here she is early Sunday morning at the tomb. It is only Mary Magdalene who has remained steadfast in her love, not succumbing to fear or anxiety. Mary does not run from her grief, but stands weeping at the place where she believes Jesus last was. She patiently waits and lets her sorrow enfold her and embrace her. She is wrapped in her anguish.

It is here that she experiences Jesus’ presence.

It is here that the spirit makes its dwelling place in her heart.

One commentator said that Mary Magdalene represents that thread of hope that runs through the Scriptures like gold: God's trust of the small ones, the ones on the margins, the ones without voice, the ones who God trusts and lifts up to shine like the sun.

How ironic, and how wonderful, that Jesus entrusts the primary proclamation of our faith to this "insider," this "enlightened one," who is also one of the "least," one of the "small ones" ...and yet, how biblical!

Mary Magdalene reminds us that God is capable of things we can't even imagine. Resurrection has no explanation. We believe because we have been told. But we also believe because we have experienced God's greatness and God's glory in our own lives.

When Jesus told Mary to “Go to my brothers and say to them ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ ” she didn't hesitate. She didn't say, “Prove it” or “That can't happen.” She went and announced, “I have seen the Lord.”

Every time I hear the Easter story, starting with the passion reading last Sunday, I can't help but ponder where I would have been in that story.

Imagine yourself in Jerusalem for the big annual festival surrounding Passover. Think of places you have been where large crowds gather, where there is a lot of activity going on, entertainment, food, fellowship. Do you tend to get caught up in the events? Would you have been swept up in the Palm Sunday parade? What about the decision to free Barabas and crucify Jesus?

I remember, as a child, attending church and feeling deeply uncomfortable having to read the part of the passion that called for Jesus' crucifixion.

On Thursday evening, at the Tenebrae service we sang the moving spiritual, *Were you There When they crucified my Lord?* Would you have been there? What about this morning? Would you have been a disciple who ran to hide or would you have wept at the tomb? Would you have believed that it was Jesus talking to you in the garden? Do you believe it now?

Of course we don't know the answers to these questions, but we are called, this Easter Sunday, to reflect on our own sense of death and resurrection.

When someone dies, particularly someone we love deeply, there is a tremendous sense of loss. Physically, they are gone. But what we learn from the Easter story today is that spiritually, they remain with us.

The Resurrection story is our story. When Jesus ended his mortal life it was not the end. His reappearance to Mary lets us know that his spirit lives on. He tells Mary not to hold onto him. We cannot cling to the earthly body, but we can create a dwelling place for the spirit.

Writing about the death of his mother, Henri Nouwen said,

If mother's agony and death were indeed an agony and death with Christ, should I not then hope that she would also participate in the sending of the Spirit? ...I began to wonder if Jesus does not send his Spirit every time someone with whom we are connected by bonds of love leave us."

To remember my mother does not mean telling her story over and over again to my friends...it does not even mean constantly thinking about her. No. It means making her a participant in God's ongoing work of redemption by allowing her to dispel in me a little more of my darkness and lead me a little closer to the light. By letting her go, I did not lose her. In and through the Spirit of Christ, she indeed is becoming a part of my very being.

So it is with Jesus.

He had promised his disciples: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know Him, because He abides with you, and He will be in you."

He will be in you.

The Spirit is in you. It is a part of who you are. It gives you the power of resurrection. Each day we experience small deaths. Disappointments, unrealized dreams, expectations that are not met. We experience deaths of relationships, loss of status, loss of jobs, failing health, all types of woes.

Yet, the promise of the resurrection is that these small deaths are met with new life. The good news is that because of Jesus Christ – every death is met with resurrection. The Holy spirit is working in you relentlessly to dispel your darkness and move you closer to the light.

Don't run from it. Work with it. Let it embrace you, enfold you.

There is a beautiful song written in 1926 by Daniel Iverson that is most often sung at Pentacost, but I find it appropriate as an Easter message. The words are:

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

This is the lesson of Easter. We are to take our sorrows and heartaches and let the spirit fall afresh on us. We are to rise up – as a resurrection people – to greet a new day with joy and anticipation. We are to answer God's call to be the church and the community that God wants us to be. We must rise above all fears and anxieties. We don't want to run and hide in our homes like Peter and the other disciple. We must trust that the promise of the resurrection will cleanse us of our sins and grant us fresh, new life.

Let this Easter Day mark the day that you are resurrected from all the small and large deaths in your life. Let this Easter Day be your day of transformation. Seize the golden thread of hope that runs throughout scripture and come live in the light of Easter. Let the Spirit of the resurrected Christ fall afresh on you.

Amen.