

## **Outside the Tomb Weeping (Context, John 20:1-8)**

**By Marge Kloos, SC**

### **“Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping.”**

Mary is living the agony of imagining the corpse of the One she has loved—she can’t shake images of the lifeless body of her beloved alone in the dark, cold certitude of death.

She remembers and longs for the One who gave her a new life when her own affliction left her without a purpose or a meaning to her life...

### **“Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping.”**

Mary’s role in the resurrection causes us to ask all sorts of questions... but ultimately, there is just one: Who is she that Jesus chose her to be the resurrection witness?

Her witness is that of the one who remained. Her character is perhaps best captured in this one short statement of scripture:

### **“Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping.”**

Few lines in scripture have drawn me into reflection as this one does. It’s oddly placed in what is meant to be the pinnacle triumphal story of the scriptures upon which generations of believers find the centering core of faith. But the image of Mary Magdala outside the tomb weeping is intended to stand out—to get our attention. Dramatically it compels the reader to feel something about the desperateness of the moment when she and she alone among the disciples realizes she **MUST** find the courage to remain at the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdala alone had the fortitude, the groundedness, the courage, the patience, the audacity to remain.

Some commentators have suggested she remained to properly wrap the body. Some have suggested she is continuing the ancient tribal tradition of having female mourners keep vigilance with the body. Some have suggested she stayed out of a childish misunderstanding of death and its finality. Yet others have suggested she remained to serve as a taunt to the ones who persecuted Jesus. But perhaps, she simply cannot move—her grief is keeping her in place. **She is anchored by a pervasive hope that the circumstances will change.** Staying with the pain is so **HARD**—so very hard that the other disciples ran away.

Mary, albeit weeping, alone remained. In my reading of the Johannine resurrection story, Mary’s weeping wraps itself around the story of the resurrection. Her tears flow gently around

the contours of discipleship as a non- negotiable aspect of her empowered vision that enabled her by the end of the story to see the risen Christ and proclaim the resurrection.

Mary's discipleship is born out of her own suffering and struggle. She is not by any means an overexposed character within the Christian tradition, so what we know about Mary Magdala must be filtered through the reality of the first century oral tradition interfacing with first century patriarchy. From the deep wounding of seven demons to her persistent vigilance at the foot of the cross, this disciple embraced the REALNESS of her life. Eyes and heart wide open, her embrace of what was real about her life made a space for God to act.

Mysteriously present through Jesus' ministry, her own suffering was documented in only one short phrase in Luke's gospel. She is introduced to us as the woman "from whom seven demons had gone out." As a Galilean woman, Mary Magdala no doubt was expected to conform to the social mores of her time—and as we are all quite aware the social norms of her time certainly did not include following a single man on a spiritual journey to Jerusalem during the Passover.

Imagine the transformations Mary went through to become the central disciple in the resurrection story! You each possess a mighty internal power to do such imagining... Sit for a moment in the realness of your own story. Recognize acknowledge the profound growth and goodness that continues to expand you as a person. (BEFORE CONTINUING, STOP FOR A BRIEF REFLECTION)

Mary's transformation began, Luke tells us, with the exorcism of seven demons. Many times I've found affinity with this faithful disciple! Many women with infirmities in the ancient world were tucked away or worse left to perish. Sadly, this happens to women in our own time. We know that Mary, and some of the other women mentioned in chapter 8 of Luke, had been cured. Why and how does Mary Magdala find a cure for her infirmity? Our assumption is "Jesus cured her." But that always feels a little too magical an explanation, although all things are possible with God so of course it is possible. But our participation in our own healing process is more complex and in this way I believe there are specific dynamics Jesus initiated and to which Mary contributed that brought about her healing. By telling us so little of the circumstances surrounding the healing of these women, the gospel writer has left the door open for religious imagination to take over.

Demons were associated with behaviors, moods, or anxieties that made the person possessing them appear to lack control over a normal way of being. Twitches, verbal outbursts, depression, phobias were all manifestations of the presence of demons. One's fate was cast—demonic people had to be treated differently. Some merciful moment in Mary's life made way for a dynamic encounter with Jesus that transformed her life and relieved her of her demonic burden.

Knowing that she was the one disciple with the endurance, courage and hope to remain at the tomb, I've long imagined Mary Magdala's disposition in this way: She was a strong-willed woman, able to resist the roles of convention assigned to her, fascinated by the political and religious world around her, groomed by ideas and interests that were not proper for a Jewish woman to know much less hold as her own, and rebellious toward those who tried to change her. Imagine the reactions of those with whom she dealt in her day-to-day life. Imagine her disposition as she tried to live out of her own integrity, only to be known as the "one possessed." Then Jesus and she find one another. Over time and through multiple conversations that friends have with one another, Jesus and Mary bring to the surface the demons and confront them together.

Flowing from many conversations over years of friendship, we might also imagine that Jesus at times spoke very directly to Mary's demons in a way that both affirmed Mary and really pulled up from the root each demon's power within her...just as we do for one another today—in authentic friendships.

Embracing the one who has resisted domination, Jesus calls to one demon in Mary: "Come forth demon of self-doubt. Mary you have resisted male domination and then doubted your good judgment."

Embracing the one who speaks for those who have no voice in a bold and honest tone, Jesus calls to a second demon in Mary: "Come forth demon of fear. Mary, you gave voice to the silenced then you feared your words were in vain!"

Embracing the one who suffered the torments of a bad self-image: Jesus calls to yet another demon in Mary: "Come forth demon who holds this woman's goodness hostage."

Embracing the one who gave all away to the poor, Jesus called out: "Come forth demon that has a strangle-hold on the mystical nature of Mary. Her gift of intuition has given her from God so that she might know the needs and suffering of others."

Each of us carries traces of these demons within our lives. Demons try to strip us of our disposition for discipleship, carefully sewn together in the Heart of God. Companions who love us, have the power to send away the demons that infiltrate our lives, demean our personhood, fracture our relationships, attempt to disengage us from relationships and distract us from God's abiding love.

You can each identify the demons that have nearly destroyed your life, your confidence, your ability to trust others. You know the demons that walk in and out of your daily discipleship. These were no doubt Mary's demons as well. (SIT FOR A MOMENT AND IN YOUR MIND'S EYE

SEE THOSE COMPANIONS WHO HAVE HELPED YOU TO DEAL WITH YOUR DEMONS... ENJOY THEIR COMPANY.)

Jesus did something others in Mary's culture were no doubt reluctant to do—he communicated with her and touched her wounds—He listened to her ideas and gave relevancy to them by affirming her as a thinking human—He provided a foundation for her dignity to swell. She was fed by his nurturing and the demons fled!

Mary, no doubt, cried tears of joy with Jesus frequently. Her tears of joy mingled with those of bitter sadness at the entrance to the tomb.

We live in a time when it is necessary to weep tears of joy as well as tears of sadness. Joy, God-given and inspired, rises out of our very incarnate flesh and moves us to confront the paralyzing forces with renewed energy. If we really allow ourselves to feel the full force of our lives intertwined with God's we will weep when the face of God rises in the tenderness of friendship or the preciousness of spontaneous caring extended in the small, mundane moments of our living.

This is what Mary Magdala is remembering while keeping vigil at the entrance to the tomb, weeping.

We live in a time when it is necessary to stand outside the tomb and weep—deep anguish can consume the very joy we stretch to grasp and cling to. Even as we create meaningful lives of love and tenderness, brutal forces push against us and disempower our confidence to believe that the inner-strength given through the grace of God is enough to carry us. How could we not weep when such intrusive and diminishing forces attempt to corrupt our discipleship?

Mary's "discipleship" was most certainly not that of a childish, dependent follower, but one who knew completely the danger of sitting at the opening to the tomb. Upon entering, she expected she would face the ultimacy of discipleship—the brutality and hardness that put Jesus and his preciousness to death. She does not follow with less fervor because all that she thought remained of her Jesus was a broken corpse. *Contraire*—she comes to the tomb **as a disciple**, as a vessel of compassion and transformation, who without shame mourns for all to see. She still believes even though the Leader has been destroyed—but she cannot shake the deep desire to imagine the world for what it might have been had Jesus not been destroyed. Never imagining Jesus would be alive, Mary came to the tomb and wept for all who would now not touch or be touched by the healing power of Jesus.

We weep for the children killed in Chicago streets, killed with guns bought and sold in black market drug rings. Should not a child know the peace of God's tender protection?

We weep for the women abused by husbands who've been taught to believe that mastery over the other is a true sign of manhood. Should not a woman find intimacy through the touch of a spouse?

We weep for the humans who are exploited workers. Should not work be the essence of our co-creative contribution added to God's generous bounty?

We weep for the horrendous abuses of power in every social institution humans have created. Should not our social institutions be the safety net around each creature so as to protect and defend the very essence of each being?

We weep for those who have been set apart because they believe a little differently, speak with a new vision, or give others the courage to no longer be satisfied at the bottom of the hierarchical heap of human struggle. Should not hierarchies of dehumanization be gone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Mary weeps—on and on and on—she weeps at the tomb. This is the opening to the broken carnage of history into which her companion, her inspiration, her Teacher of Life and Love engaged the grace of God. This is the place where she found an invitation to her work through her grief.

(Take a moment to feel the crushing, desperateness of Mary Magdala as she wept. Imagine what it is for which we weep today...)

A certain bit of brokenness will be part of the story of the disciple—death, for instance, is inevitable and we will be separated for a time from ones we desperately love. Jesus, however, gave Mary Magdala a new vision—an appreciation for brokenness that inevitably touched her fleshy, limited body and mind. Before Mary arrived God tenderly and mercifully rolled away the stone—a stone that represents the bolder of grief we carry for the world that might have been. And if we, like Mary, dare to enter, the empty tomb stirs us to **anticipate the grace of God making things different.**

As her tears subsided in the midst of the confused scene, she demanded to know where Jesus' body had been taken—she found her voice and she confronted the angels with questions. This is something she would not have been able to do had the demons not been dealt with earlier in her life. Then, she sees and hears Jesus again, as she had earlier during her early days of discipleship. So filled with certainty about the power of his death, Mary didn't even recognize Jesus at first. To her mind, he was dead. In her final stage of moving through her grief, Mary recognizes the VOICE calling her by name. Women were not always called by name and rarely in public, but this gesture of respect gave great dignity to Mary Magdala.

The story of Mary Magdala describes in wonderful images the therapeutic process of dealing with grief, trauma and loss that we must all enter if we are to get to resurrection—yes—we care that we get to the BIG resurrection, but I am talking about the resurrections that await the faithful disciple who sits at the entrance to the tomb of her own broken life, day-in-and-day-out. Real fidelity is not merely accepting the circumstances as they are, but remaining in the midst of it all so as to be nearer to the broken One.

But in Mary Magdala's day as in our own, brokenness is far too often caused by the indiscriminate use of power to destroy, diminish, and deny quality of life to other creatures. She no doubt desperately hoped Jesus' way of being human would inspire courageous acts of acceptance, nurturing, unity and compassion.

As faith-filled disciples, tears come quite naturally in the midst of wars, investigations, silencings, and the struggle to believe that the mission continues with all that pushes against that likelihood—even as the corpse lies broken in the tomb, God was rolling away the stone. Mary knew the persecution and violent end to Jesus' life was not right, not moral, not justified—just as we know in our day that there are so many abominations and atrocities diminishing the quality of life. I would imagine that more than once in the midst of her weeping she cried out to God, "why?" But weeping brings an odd sense of relief that gives way to one's ability to enter the tomb. No amount of silencing or investigating will halt the power of our God to roll away the stone. God will respond to the weeping of those whose hearts are broken. God will transform in spite of all barriers, persecutions and diminishments. Tears of sadness will turn to tears of joy.

I remain in religious life and the Church, not out of desperation or a sense of duty. And while some days are more mysterious than others about why I remain at the opening to the tomb, there is a persistent invitation to vigilant attending that is life-sustaining. I suspect it is not because I am staying to wrap the body for burial. I am certain I am not naively willing to believe that this is "my place" of life to which God has led me and from which I am not free to leave. But, like Mary, I am drawn to the place where God's mercy has preceded me and anticipated my arrival—the place where Jesus' body is rising each and every day in some form and through marvelously, wonderfully graced creatures who would otherwise not be in my life.

Relationship is the crux of our existence—and no one demonstrates the relevancy and primacy of relationship better than Mary Magdala. John's telling of the resurrection we heard this evening reminds us to step into the consciousness of Mary Magdala and assume her soulfulness for a time so we might understand the meaning of her discipleship in our own time.

As John has told the story of the resurrection, Jesus had already risen when Mary arrived at the tomb. He was the compelling force with Mary that gave her the endurance to stay outside the

tomb, weeping. None of us alone moves the mercy of God to roll away the stone and liberate the crucified Christ. Mary could not imagine moving the mission forward without Jesus. But, Jesus had not left her—and in her slow discovery she demonstrates what is often at the heart of our human dilemma about real discipleship. When humans are startled by what God reveals, we often react against it, just as Mary did when Jesus first spoke to her. Again, when Jesus first spoke to Mary, she did not run away. She remained. And to her God revealed the most precious truth of all: Jesus lives!

(TAKE A MOMENT TO BE PRESENT TO THE LIVING CHRIST AND FEEL THE AWE WITHIN YOUR WHOLE BEING...)

I believe we are on the cusp of rediscovering that our weeping has been heard and God's graciousness will explode around us in new and extraordinary ways—we are beginning to hear Jesus' voice anew and realize that it's really Jesus, Alive!

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