

Easter Vigil: Bishopscourt Chapel, Sale; 11 April 2020

Through the Eyes of Mary Magdalene, Part 4

My name is Mary. The twelve call me 'the Magdalene' because I come from Magdala, by the shore of Lake Galilee. Others call me all sorts of things – especially the men. He always just called me 'Mary'. And how I ached to hear that one word from him again.

Sunday morning, very early. A dome of bluish light over to the east of the city as Mary, James's mother, set out with me. A grizzly, unwanted task lay before us: one best performed before the sun could begin its baking work.

We staggered out of the gates together under the mixed weight of sweet-smelling spices and the gall of grief. If you've ever lost someone, you'll know what it's like two or three days afterwards: the fuss has abated; life goes on for the living; but the pain burrows deeper – like a smouldering coal in your chest.

Scarcely a word was spoken between us, beyond what was necessary to make our way to the place where Joseph had directed us on Passover eve. Hard to believe that was barely 48 hours ago; it felt as though a lifetime has passed – as though the life I knew before had ended.

I don't really know how to describe what we experienced next . . . Several accounts of these things are already going about like wild-fire, as you'd expect – none of which capture what 'happened': that's not what such stories are for.

We had heard the tomb was being guarded by Roman soldiers at the request of the chief priests. As we drew nearer to the garden we began fretting about whether they would allow us to tend his body, and if so, help us move the entrance stone aside.

Just as we arrived some soldiers came thundering past us, running every which way in flat panic. The ground seemed to shake with their stampede – or was it us who shook in alarm? Other guards were standing stock still up ahead, as if frozen to the spot, staring into the suddenly blinding light, for the sun must just now have risen, spearing its rays over the top of his tomb.

We dropped our fragrant burdens to shield our eyes – was it open? Had the soldiers taken him from us in death as well as life? Then a voice – whose? – forgive me: although some time has passed I feel like I'm still catching my breath...

You see, we bolted from that place like startled goats, tripping and gasping, for I don't know how long. When we couldn't run any more we just stood and held each other, a single quivering mass of wonder, and terror.

It wasn't him, but it had named him: 'the crucified one'. He is always to be the crucified one, even – but wait, that is for you to discover . . .

'Galilee, return to Galilee, he is not here, he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him.'

These words filled my head like a psalmist's refrain as we fled. Galilee . . . where this all began; where I first saw him – or rather, he first saw me. Why, having come to a stone-dead end, would we go back to the start?

And what could we possibly tell the others? They'll think us mad! Anyone who gets wind of it will think us mad. But speak we must.

Head down, rounding a corner, my path was blocked by feet that could only be his. Scarred from the nails, but somehow bearing him to us – those feet I had wept over, anointed, kissed.

We threw ourselves down at them, and again the tears came – tears of disbelief, of relief, and of joy.

Then gone from us, or us from him, and running again with hearts pounding, bursting.

We were not the only ones, it seemed, to have been disturbed by an unthinkable possibility: the crucified one is risen; in truth, he is risen!

If this was madness, and surely it was, then the alternative was a greater madness: for death to hold him was madness; for the giver of so much life to lie in the grave was madness.

I remember the story he told us about the man with two sons: how the son who is cut off – which, in our culture, is to be dead – says, 'I will arise and go to my Father . . .' That's just what he'd done.

And, as was his way, he'd taken us with him. For we were dead, lost: cut off from ourselves and each other, cut off from the one he called 'Father', until he found us and called us again by the shore of Galilee.

So it is that we went back to the beginning. And we searched the scriptures – the law, the prophets, the writings – and we began to re-receive, to re-claim our own story – our faith tradition – to try to make sense of it alongside our baffling experience. And we did begin to speak: the crucified one is risen; in truth, he is risen!

I guess that's what people of faith have been doing ever since Abraham: shape the story with their life; shape their life with the story. It's what you do, isn't it? For this is your story as much as mine, and you will find your own words for its telling, and retelling, indeed you must.

They'll think you mad, of course, as they did us, as they did me. But anything else is madness.

For today Adam is restored and Eve consoled; today we are refashioned, as once, in a parallel story, I was refashioned by a single word – in a different garden, but spoken by one and the same gardener as called to Adam and Eve: 'Mary'.

+Richard, Gippsland