

The First Apostle

Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

John 20: 1-18
Psalm 118

Christ is Risen. Christ is risen indeed.

I have to share the news with you. He is alive. My joy overwhelms even the pain of losing him to torture and death.

Jesus saved me from a life of disgrace and hatred. My life had been so tenuous. Choosing to follow him didn't take away the uncertainties exactly. Following an itinerant preacher is not a life of predictability. But at least I was not alone. There was a certain amount of security being with the other disciples and the women that followed him. We looked out for each other. We took care of each other.

Since Jesus was not accepted in his hometown of Nazareth, we traveled all over Galilee and Judea, even Samaria doing ministry. It was painful for him to be distrusted by his own people yet he was fairly philosophical about it all saying, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." He reminded us that even our great prophets Elijah and Elisha were not understood or able to do miracles in their home areas. We became his family.

I joined the wandering group almost by accident. I was barely surviving; many people said I had demons, seven of them. Call it demons, or depression, mania, addiction, exhaustion, abuse, abandonment, a closed womb. I was desperate to find a way to live or else to die.

I had few friends but one of them had heard about Jesus. She had heard that many women came to Jesus to be healed of their so-called incurable illnesses like hemorrhages or leprosy. And people came to ask for healing for their daughters.

I was out of my mind with anxiety and fear. The dark cloud that hung over my life was so thick I couldn't even think about finding Jesus myself. My friends got me to Jesus somehow, as a last resort really. It was that encounter that changed my life. He healed me, miraculously removed the "demons" that had haunted me for much of my life.

What could I do but follow him and become part of what he called his "family?" Those of us who followed him were joined by love and friendship and commitment to continuing the ways that he taught.

He had a biological family of course; he didn't just spring from the ground like Adam. But when his mother and brothers came to see him, he sent them away, saying, "Here are my mother and brothers. Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

It seemed harsh to me, that he would treat his own family this way. After all, my own family had treated me similarly. I know what it feels like to be pushed aside, ignored and treated disrespectfully. I was grateful this time to be on the inside of this group that I could call my family.

Of course community living is not easy. Tension is to be expected in any family. There was a certain amount of jockeying for power. The sons of Zebedee had a special request for Jesus. They were determined to sit next to him in his

glory, for all eternity. They even had their mother ask Jesus for this favor. But if Jesus didn't answer the door for his own mother, he certainly was not swayed by the mother of James and John.

He maintained that this kind of "special treatment" was not his to give. Those who wanted to become greatest would serve, almost become a slave. I listened eagerly. James, John and the other men fancied themselves on the inner circle with Jesus. But what Jesus said allowed room for me and the other women who followed.

Some people might imagine that Jesus wanted to start a new religion. He said things like, "You must hate this life in order to keep it." And "Take up your cross and follow me." (Most of us didn't have much to lose so it was any easy choice to make.) But it wasn't so much about following him as it was following him toward Yahweh.

He was a good Jew. He always pointed us to God. He reminded us of what Moses heard when he saw the burning bush. Moses asked God's name and God said, "I AM the God of your ancestors, Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Leah, Rachel and Jacob. This is my name forever; I AM. Remember it for all generations."

And so Jesus taught us, saying I AM the Way, I AM the Truth. I AM the Light of the World. We understood that his teachings were the way to God, that this was God's truth. He was so in tune with God that he came to represent God to us. We began to suspect that he was the promised Messiah, God's own chosen one.

Those few years that Jesus was in my life went quickly. My life was changed. I found my voice in a way I had never experienced. The women who followed Jesus listened to me. Maybe it was how my life had taken such a turn; I knew clearly what the alternatives to following Jesus were. I could even talk with the male disciples — at least some of them. I wasn't used to being taken seriously, but with Jesus it was different. He told me things; we spoke together. I had questions and we mused together on what God is like, on the Torah, the prophets.

But what I experienced and what the religious leaders understood about Jesus were two very different things. I admit he did not teach like most of the rabbis and priests. In fact, sometimes he got into arguments with the religious leaders about scripture. They got very angry at his interpretation, that he took the scripture so personally.

And the Romans? They were just afraid of anyone who could draw crowds like Jesus did. They were afraid of insurrection at every turn. It was only three Passovers until the teachings of Jesus were considered seditious and dangerous, even though he was teaching the law and the prophets.

As things began to fall apart, when he began to talk about betrayal and death, I was devastated. But I knew from how he taught us that that he was not going to run. He was not going to change his teaching just to save himself. He was committed to following the way of God, of bringing all people to God as Isaiah says: the outcasts like me, common laborers like Simon and Andrew, learned men like Nicodemus, people who had money, like Mary, Martha and

Lazarus, even foreigners like the Syrophonecian woman. Jesus shared God's peace with all of us. He said we all have a place in the reign of God.

And for this he was killed.

Crucifixion is a gruesome and humiliating way to die, hung naked in front of everyone who passes by, nailed hand and foot to a piece of wood, unable to take the two steps down to the ground. You get weaker and weaker until you can no longer heave a breath.

Most of the men who were followers ran away in fear for their own lives. But his mother, his aunt, another follower named Mary and I stayed with him. It wasn't that we wanted to see his misery of course. It was just that we didn't want him to be alone. He had accompanied us in our difficulties, how could we leave him desolate?

Some people say you can choose when you die. It seems like maybe Jesus did. He didn't last nearly as long as some people do on the cross. He said he was thirsty, so we gave him a bit of the sour wine that was there. It reminded me of his life, when he turned water to wine, when he fed 5,000 people, when he gave us wine at that last Passover and said it was a new covenant in his blood. And here we were, reaching out to him, giving him wine vinegar in his pain and agony.

Then he whispered, "it is finished" and he was gone. We could almost see his spirit depart from his body.

We women who were gathered felt such grief and heartache. How could this have happened to one we loved so, who had changed our world?

There was not much we could do now but what we women always do in death. Wrap the body with spices and lay it in a tomb. We were grateful to Joseph for helping with the body. He asked Pilate if he could carry Jesus to a tomb. And then Nicodemus came with the spices.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had been secret followers of Jesus when he was alive. (Couldn't give it all up to follow since they had a lot to give.) Now in his death they crept out of hiding to help. Nicodemus must have felt a bit guilty — 100 pounds of spices! We had prepared a lot of bodies for burial but never with that much myrrh and aloe. We lovingly wrapped his wounded body and placed him in the tomb. The Sabbath was approaching. We had to go home to observe the Holy day and to mourn.

Sunday morning I woke early. I had barely slept for grieving and I was nauseous with anxiety. Even though I knew I couldn't get in and it was dangerous to be caught near the tomb, I went. I just had to be near his body.

When I got there I saw that someone had taken away the stone that covered the entrance. This could only mean one thing, grave robbers. I ran to tell Simon and the other disciple that Jesus' body was gone. They ran back to the tomb at a pace I couldn't match. They went in and saw for themselves that he was gone. When they saw that I spoke the truth, they immediately started back home to safety. I got to the tomb, out of breath, just as they were leaving.

All I could do was stand there and cry. Then I ventured one glance for myself. But when I looked in, the tomb was not empty. Instead of the body wrapped in white linen, there were two angels in white sitting right where his

head and feet should have been. They asked why I was weeping. What could I say except what I had said to Simon and the others? “They have taken my Beloved and I don’t know where they have put him.”

Then someone outside the tomb addressed me. Was I hearing voices? Was it the owner of the garden? It was the same question they all asked, “Why are you weeping?” I didn’t even bother to look up from my tears. “Please, where have you taken him? If he was in the way, I will carry him away myself.” Then I heard my name, in that familiar voice. “Mary.” I turned around.

“Rabbouni!” It was him.

I reached out to touch him, to greet him, but he stepped back saying, “Do not try to hold on to me. I have not yet gone to be with God. But go to my brothers and tell them that you have seen me. Tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” We were still a family! It was not over.

Exhilarated, I did as he commanded. I told everyone I met that I had seen Jesus again. It was not the end but a new beginning.

After a few days of spreading the news I recalled that argument between James and John about who was the greatest, about who would sit at the right and left of Jesus in his glory. He had said that it would be the least, the last, the servant of all. I began to wonder, might there be room for me there, Mary of Magdala?

I understand that I am just a small part of the story. When I am remembered it is usually for my old self, maligned with lies about prostitution. But

Jesus saw through the demons, Jesus saw the possibilities in me and helped me to see them too.

After he died, I saw the possibilities for him, in his resurrection and new life. I share the Word with everyone I meet. I have seen my Rabbi and he lives.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.