

Easter

Most of you know I'm a second career pastor. I finished seminary in January of 2009. Since my husband was deployed then and my son was still in high school, I opted to wait until fall of that year to be open for a call to a church.

So, I had a few months to find things to do. During the summer I volunteered to help with vacation Bible school at my home congregation. I told them they could put me wherever they needed me, so they put me with the 4-year-olds. Mostly my task was to shepherd the little people around to the different stations – crafts, snacks, physical activity, the day's little skit, music...all that stuff that goes into vacation Bible school.

It was fun, but man four-year-olds are exhausting. Anyway, one of the kids was this adorable little girl name Georgie. Georgie was the neighbor of one of the other volunteers. I don't think she was from a family that went to church, but I don't remember for sure.

One of the days, we were at the station where some of the older kids put on a little skit. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor – because apparently, I could do that then. Georgie came over and laid down with her head in my lap to watch the skit.

The skit was about Jesus' resurrection and at one point one of the actors excitedly proclaimed, Jesus is alive!

Georgie looked up at me, eyes shining, and said "aren't you just so glad Jesus is alive!?"

I'm not sure I've ever heard the Easter message proclaimed any better. I could probably just stop there.

But, you know I went to all those years of seminary and we're dealing with all the complexities of John's gospel, so I sort of feel like I should say a little more. But while we work through what happened to Mary here, hold on to Georgie and her "aren't you just so glad Jesus is alive." Because it's not so far away from Mary's "I have seen the Lord!"

It took a bit for Mary to get there. Her understanding came in stages.

The story unfolds. She goes to the tomb and sees the stone rolled away. She doesn't look, but assumes Jesus' body has been removed. So she runs and tells Peter and the beloved disciple...often assumed to be John, but we don't actually know.

They race to the tomb. They look inside and believe...something. It's not clear quite what. Clearly they haven't really grasped it yet. Real belief in a resurrected Christ should elicit more than a puzzled return home.

Mary still doesn't know what to think. Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' closest disciples. Women clearly had a pretty equal role in Jesus' ministry. The church later tried to diminish her importance, and even cast her as a reformed prostitute. She was never a prostitute.

Mary doesn't even appear in John's gospel until the cross, although we know a bit more about her from the other gospels. But when she is at the cross, we get a picture of her devotion. And here, in the garden, we really get a pretty vivid picture of their closeness.

Jesus Christ Superstar aside, she does know how to love him. She shows up, even when all seems lost.

Now, at his tomb, she's beside herself with grief. Not only that, but something's happened to Jesus' body. She meets what she believes is the gardener and asks if he knows what happened.

From here, the story gets more complex with more layers in that typical John way. Jesus speaks. Mary...and she knows. She knows it's Jesus.

This takes us back to Jesus and his good shepherd teaching...he says, I am the shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know my voice. Mary knows the voice of her shepherd...her beloved teacher and friend.

That's the moment where things change for Mary. This encounter with Jesus changes everything for her.

She wants to hang on to this moment. She wants to hang on to Jesus as he is...or at least as he was. She wants things to go back to the way they were, before all the fear and pain and death. But she can't. For Jesus' resurrection to matter for the whole world God loves, there's more to come.

So, in case resurrection isn't hard enough for us to grasp...or maybe even swallow, there's this business of ascension. This trip through John has probably been the first time I've really grasped the importance of Jesus' ascension.

Do I get how it worked? Not at all. But here's the thing...Jesus walked the earth for 30 some years. People living then got to know him in the flesh. His followers – men and women – came to love him. But that part of history is over. Something new is born with Jesus' resurrection.

When Mary finally grasps it, that's her resurrection moment...it's when she herself is born into something new.

But not even Jesus' resurrection could make him present to all people in all times...people like us. Without the ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we'd still be kind of where Mary was – fumbling around the empty tomb, not sure what to think.

The ascension is Jesus' way of giving all humanity in all times and places the same kind of relationship with God that he has.

I sort of envision the ascended Jesus as a pathway...the way... that connects us to God. Do I really actually get that how that happens? Again, no.

But I do feel its impact. I've felt its impact over the last several months as we've read all these stories in John. Stories about encounters Jesus had with people when he walked the earth...people like Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind and Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

I can put myself in those people's shoes and imagine what it was like to actually talk with Jesus in the flesh. I've often felt almost like I was there. I can be there at the tomb with Mary. I can be there as she hears Jesus' voice...Mary.

But just as Mary couldn't hang on to Jesus, we can't just hang on to only those ancient stories. The connection Jesus has made between heaven and earth also makes Christ present in the world today...often in super surprising places.

Places that are the last place you might expect to meet Jesus...a prison cell...a homeless person begging on the street...bedraggled asylum seekers fleeing to a better life. At a death bed.

Because of the risen and ascended Christ, we can meet Jesus in the people who will gather around our holiday tables...the brother who's a pilot...the sister who is an engineer...the aunt who's a nurse...the retired grandpa, wondering about his place in the world... the uncle who's done prison time...the nephew who is gay...the cousin who is an addict...the in-law with whose politics we disagree...the lonely neighbor we invited to join us.

Because this whole incarnation, resurrection, and ascension cycle means somehow Jesus is present in all of us...and in all places in creation.

Places where we can, against all the reasons it shouldn't be true, say with Mary, "I have seen the Lord!"

Or we can say with an excited 4-year-old – aren't you just so glad Jesus is alive?