

Easter, 2008

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings.' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me. Matthew 28:10

Christ has been raised from the dead! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Our appointed readings for this Easter Sunday give us two choices for the Gospel. One is Matthew, which we have just heard. The other choice is John's account of what happened at the tomb.

In both accounts, we hear of women, Jesus' beloved disciples, venturing out to the tomb early in the morning of the first day of the week. In John's version, Mary Magdalene starts out alone. When she sees the empty tomb, she runs to collect Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. So John's story gets some men involved, but they leave, in their fear and confusion, while Magdalene remains. In Matthew, Magdalene is accompanied by 'the other Mary,' one of the Mary's who had stood by the Cross. None of the male disciples show up at the tomb.

In both accounts, the women encounter first angels, then Jesus. In John, it's Magdalene alone with two angels. In Matthew, two women and one angel.

Why these differences? Well, the Gospelist John does fine, dramatic portraits of his characters; a few stand out vividly, Magdalene among them. Here she stands alone with Jesus, a spotlight shining on her and her unique faithfulness and courage

Matthew stresses throughout his Gospel that *all* followers of Jesus are called to spread the Good News of God's love and justice. His emphasis is on community responsibility – our mutual accountability for ministry and mission. When Jesus commissions his disciples, he sends them out, not alone, but two by two. The work of God's reconciling peace and justice can be difficult and lonely. Indeed, the work of simply living can be difficult and lonely. We need companionship. The two Maries support and comfort one another in their astonishment and fear, in their courage and conviction.

John presents Jesus as the Risen Christ, not only after the empty tomb but throughout his entire Gospel. John's Jesus is kingly, majestic, transcendent, and the *two* angels guarding his tomb reflect his exalted status. They seem to have no other function

than to reproach Mary for weeping. Who rolled away the stone? Maybe Jesus himself, with his divine power and strength.

Matthew's one angel is more active. The *angel* rolls away the stone, the *angel* knows what has happened to Jesus, the *angel* doesn't reproach the women, but comforts them. On the one hand, the angel looks like lightning, scarily supernatural. On the other hand, the angel interacts with the woman, connects with the women, comforts and guides the women, as they comfort and guide one another and will proceed to guide and comfort the male disciples. In the midst of fear and chaos, bonds are formed, community reestablished, and hope rekindled. The angel becomes part of the human enterprise. Heaven and earth are joined together.

But the most remarkable and telling difference in these Gospel stories, to me, comes in what Jesus says to the women. In John's Gospel he tells Mary, *'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'* In John's Gospel, Jesus is up, up and away. As he has been all along. In John's Gospel, Jesus always has one foot out the mortal door, one foot in heaven.

And what does Jesus say in Matthew's account? He says, *'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'* Jesus is not vanishing. He is not going up. He is right here, right now. Strange and unprecedented as this encounter may be, the interchange sounds almost ordinary, the instructions practical. Jesus has an itinerary: to go to Galilee, a place on a map, a place where he and the disciples have been many times before, and where they will meet again.

Jesus is not going, and he is not gone. He will be available once again to his beloved friends. As he is available to us. The Risen Christ has not gone up. Not gone away. The Risen Christ is here for us to discover, to seek and to find in the faces and hands and hearts of those around us. Here to find in the spirits of those whom we have loved and lost but whose memories live on with us. Here to find in the recurrent miracle of love triumphing over fear and death. Here to find in the promise of new life, new vision, and new hope.

Here for us, here, now and always. And that, my dear friends, is the Good News of the Resurrection. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen