EASTER VIGIL

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Matthew 28:1

When we read or hear Scripture, we don't think, always, about literary or dramatic effects. We regard the bible as sacred, as divinely inspired. We don't tend to think about the Book the way we do about a novel or a play. Isn't that sacrilegious, somehow?

But the bible was written by people. And the gospels, certainly, are narratives. They tell stories. And they are all carefully crafted by writers who want to make particular points, and they make those points not simply through plot and dialogue, but with literary techniques as well.

So what do we have here, in this story of the morning of the Resurrection? First, we have an earthquake, a violent natural phenomenon. And if we remember back to the events of Friday, just a day and half earlier in the biblical narrative, there was another such natural upheaval, when *from noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.*

Nature is mirroring human events – emotional, psychological, spiritual events. A great disturbance among the followers of Jesus is reflected in a great disturbance in the heavens. In literary criticism we call this "the pathetic fallacy" – the notion that nature mirrors human feelings and moods. But it's an old, old idea, and the gospel writers use it to good effect.

Jesus has died, and the heavens are rent asunder. And then this bookend effect: the earth shakes, and an angel rolls away the stone. The cataclysm of death, and the cataclysm of resurrection: equally wild, disturbing, and terrifying.

And then the next reversal, what happens to the women. We have Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" coming to see the tomb. Who are these women?

Well, Mary Magdalene has developed a reputation – a legend– through the centuries as a prostitute, a sinful *woman of the city.* But in fact, the only appearance she makes before the Passion and Resurrection stories are as *Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out.*

So Magdalene was someone who had been possessed – had suffered from mental illness, presumably. But that's all we know of her until she shows up at the foot of the cross, and then at the tomb. She has been transformed, clearly, from a marginal, unstable

woman into one of Jesus' most devoted and courageous disciples. And unlike the men, she is not dissuaded by Jesus' death, but continues loyal into this next terrifying chapter, the unknown future.

And Mary – the other Mary– is presumably Mary of Bethany, who appears more frequently as the passive sister, sitting at Jesus' feet, the crying sister, after her brother Lazarus has died.

It's not the active, assertive Bethany sister Martha who accompanies Magdalene to the tomb in the dark early morning, but the former contemplative sister, turned activist.

So somewhere in the threshold space that is Jesus' dying, the trajectory of these women's lives change. They are no longer sideliners, incidentals, petitioners. These women are the hinge of change, the hinge on which salvation history will swing.

And that's the story of tonight, my dear friends. A story of a journey, which we have just reenacted, a journey from darkness into light. A story of thunderous upheavals in nature, reflecting a momentous upheaval in human and sacred history. A story of lives transformed, and death overcome. The story of Easter.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.