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The statue of the Risen Christ on top of the facade of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



by Mary M. McGlone

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April 19, 2025

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"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

We recite this phrase, or one of its variants, as habitually as we make the exceedingly bold statement that what we are about to do, we do, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." What real difference do those declarations make in our daily lives? To discern that, let's look at Mary Magdalene's experience gradually internalizing the reality of the resurrection.

Today's Gospel, an excerpt from John 20:1-18, shows that the resurrection might have been as hard to comprehend as was the cross. Setting the scene for humanity's first encounter with the Risen Christ, this passage seems to depict as much confusion as faith. John can help us walk with Mary through all that happened as she came to unanticipated faith.

Easter Sunday

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Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Psalm 118

Colossians 3:1-4

John 20:1-9

John tells us that Mary set out in the dark. In this Gospel, that has more to do with the texture of the times than the movement of sun and stars. Who on Earth could have been sadder than she? She had witnessed how a violent, fanatical mob egged on by civil and religious leaders tried to definitively eliminate God's offer of love in Jesus. Surely, she shared in the Father's grief as she kept watch through every moment of torture, mocking and the soldiers' blind obedience that filled the hours from the end of their supper until Jesus' demise.

Jesus' death affected Mary much like it affected Jesus; he died into the unknown and she had lost everything, including her reputation, to be part of the reign of God that Jesus heralded and made present. After the cross, Mary had nothing left, and the empty tomb made that physically real. Now there was nobody: No body, no sense of the presence of God, no hope, only a hole in her soul.

Living in that tragic state, Mary assumed that Jesus' body had been stolen, and ran to bring the news to Peter and the other disciple. According to John's Gospel, the three ran back to the tomb. When the men went in, they accepted the truth of Mary's mindboggling report. This part of the story ends with the paradoxical statement that one of the disciples "saw and believed," although "they did not yet understand," and went home.

Mary, still dwelling in darkness, remained at the tomb. When angels asked why she wept, she retold the bad news of the stolen body. Then someone asked the question Jesus had posed to his first disciples as well as to the thugs who arrested him: "Whom do you seek?" (John 1:38, 18:7).

Convinced in her desolation, she missed the question and asked, "Did you take him?" When he spoke her name, she realized that she was in the real and transformed presence of her Lord. As she rejoiced in what she did not understand, Jesus did what he had done with the disciples at the Transfiguration and explained that this moment of glory was not the end, but a beginning. He commissioned her to proclaim the now-complete Gospel, the undreamed-of truth that evil was vanquished and now was the time to bring that Good News to the world.

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In our reading from Acts, Peter describes his experience of the Risen Christ. For Peter, the resurrection signaled the forgiveness of sin: the radical and freeing truth that evil had no ultimate or lethal power. Paul taught about the effects of that: "You have been raised with Christ, let that alone be your guiding star." Both Peter and Paul proclaimed that an absolutely new kind of life was thriving in the world.

Mary and the others experienced the cost of resurrection before they comprehended its grace. They could authentically proclaim the living Christ because, with him, they had suffered the power of evil and witnessed its demise. The Easter proclamation has its deepest meaning for those who have confronted the demonic, hoped against hope, and been given an intimation of evil's downfall and the transformations that began with Christ's victory.

Knowing what she did, Mary might well suggest that our Easter prayer be something like this: "Grant us the grace and patient courage to understand what we proclaim

and the faithfulness to see it through."

Faith in Christ's resurrection is not a dogma, but a life-orientation that flows from the conviction that Christ's new life is ours as well. The resurrection is not a mystery to be clung to, but a practice to develop in ever new and deeper ways. As we live into it, our lives will proclaim Christ's presence and we can dare to proceed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This will make all the difference in the world.