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Text: John 20:1, 11-16  
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## “Mary”

Always such a pleasure to return to FCCOL.

In these challenging times I feel a special urgency to continue to engage the profound, mysterious, claims of Easter.

- That the spirit present in Jesus was not defeated by the brutality of the cross.
- That the spirit present in Jesus during his life continues to be alive today as a knowable life-giving presence.
- That this spirit continues to have the capacity to empower us to live into the fullness of the life for which God created every one of us.

I have, of course, heard these Easter claims for years, but I still struggle to have them come vividly live in a way that deeply informs the way I live day to day especially in the face of growing challenges we face today.

Like I’m sure many of you, I have turned to the Christian tradition to help me engage with these Easter claims.

In my first experiences turning to the church as a child what I found was a focus on believing claims about God—For example the Apostle’s creed I grew up with and recited every Sunday. For some people this call to believing things about God is compelling and life giving. For me it was not.

Fast forward many years to when I first crossed the doorway of FCCOL. I came with a longing for a connection to God but also years of struggle with the conventional version of the Christian tradition.

I am so grateful to say, however, that when I came to FCCOL over thirty years ago I encountered a new way of thinking about God. Through preaching by so many talented ministers and excellent reading suggestions and discussion with David Good I was able to begin crafting a way of thinking about God that made sense to me.

That framework for thinking about God is still a great gift. In addition, however, I have recently been drawn to the writing of ancient and modern Christian mystics. From the Middle Ages figures including Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen and Meiser Eckhart. From modern times mystics such as Thomas Merton, Teilhard de Chardin and James Finley.

And in the mystics, I found a path to add to the theology I had been honing for years.

So, what is a mystic? Central in my reading is the mystic’s focus to cultivating an **experience of** God. What the mystics call a knowing of the heart. The kind of heart “knowing” that is experienced as profoundly true even if your mind cannot put that knowing into words.

I find clues pointing to this kind of heart knowing in our passage from John's gospel.

We find Mary very early in the morning weeping at the tomb. Her heart is broken but her mind is fixated on the body of her beloved Jesus—over and over she asks, “where have they taken him”.

Her mind is working overtime focused on a plan—tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away. While she is deep in this planning loop, in John's telling, the risen Christ stands before her, but she does not recognize him assuming he is the gardener.

What insights might this telling give us about engaging the Easter mystery?

First, I would say it is not lack of information/concepts of resurrection that explain Mary's fail to recognize the risen Christ. In John's gospel she has heard the concept of resurrection from the mouth of Jesus during his lifetime.

One example from chapter 14 Jesus says

“I will not leave you orphans. I shall come to you. In a short time, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me because I will live and you also will live” (John 14)

She has seen the stone rolled away.

She has spoken with angles.

But even with all this information...she is unable to recognize the risen Christ standing before her.

What flips the switch?

A single word—Mary!

A single word that includes no information, no theory, no doctrine

Rather a single word that activates what the mystics would call the knowing of the heart.

A single word that activates a deep inner knowing/intuition that was always present within her.

And in reconnecting with that heart knowing and inner experience, she can see what she couldn't see before.

This heart knowing... allows her to not only recognize the risen Christ **but also to** name what she sees as Teacher.... guide...an opening to new life

All scripture, for me, is an invitation to use our imagination to enter deeply and personally into the story. I invite us to place ourselves in the garden along with Mary.

When I do, I can immediately relate to Mary's responding to loss with a decent into a planning loop. Been there...done that...still doing that.

But the question I find myself asking is--How might I have a similar experience of being opened to the presence of Christ. How might I open myself to the ongoing Mary! moments all around me?

This may seem out of reach. But this brings me to a second—maybe even more stunning--key insight I take from the mystics.

To a person, the mystics teach that God is always present waiting to be recognized—like the risen Christ in the garden.

Eckhart— “God is no further than the door of your heart”

Eckhart continues “it is true that this high knowledge is a gift of God... But the fact is that [God] wants to bestow it on us; is constantly watching and waiting for the chance to give it to us.

“You need not seek him here or there...he stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open and let him in. No need to call to him from afar; he can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for him.”

Wow—God longs for me a thousand times more than I long for God! That’s a lot of longing!

A remarkable vision that is repeated over and over by ancient and modern mystics.

A fully present, available, loving God longing to be know...setting no pre-conditions.

A God the mystics teach who is offering a torrent of Mary! Moments that take many forms. Some profound—a rare momentary experience of oneness with everything. Most are quite ordinary—a beautiful sunset, a child’s laughter, an act of kindness, music that touches our hearts, a line of a poem that strikes a mysterious cord within us, a sense of gratitude, a line of scripture.

Any yet, the ability to deeply experience and let these moments transform me remains elusive.

So, why then is this experience of God’s presence so elusive?

Thomas Merton. “We have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it. All we need to do is to experience what we already possess. The trouble is, we aren’t taking the time to do so”

For me incredible motivation to figure out what “taking the time” would look like.

The mystics offer many insights into the path to deeper experience of heart knowing but today I’d like to share just one that comes up over and over.

Silence

External silence through turning down the volume on all the noise that bombards us in so many forms. Making space for silence creates more space for heart knowing.

Maybe even more challenging, cultivating an internal silence through quieting our thoughts

Saint Augustine speaking over 1,500 years ago: “But you, so restless, refuse to be still. You are like the Egyptians tormented by gnats. These the tiniest of flies, always restless, flying about, swarm at your eyes giving no rest” I cannot even imagine what Augustine would say about our modern world!

One practice for cultivating this internal silence that has been especially helpful for me is the modern rediscovery of a form of prayer without words or images called Christian meditation or contemplative prayer.

There are many wonderful resources on this form of prayer rooted deeply in silence. One I’ve used for a few years—reading a few pages every day-- is Finding Your Hidden Treasure: The way of Silent Prayer by Benignus O’Rourke.

To give a flavor of contemplative prayer a few words from Fr. O'Rourke.

The most important journey in life is the journey inward  
to the depths of our own being.

Taking us beyond words and images into silence,  
it is a journey we are all invited to make.

The silence allows the restless mind to become still  
and in the stillness we enter a new world.

We return to our hearts  
where we find our true selves.

We discover an ancient way of finding God  
that has almost become lost.

Slowly we realize that we are in union  
with the source of life and love itself.

It might seem strange to say that something as seemingly simple as cultivating a deep inner and outer silence can help us connect to the Easter mystery. But I find it very encouraging that words or concepts are not the only route to engaging with the truths of Easter.

I am encouraged by the invitation to open more fully to a "heart" knowing that the spirit of Jesus was not defeated by the brutality of the cross and that this spirit equally cannot be defeated by the brutality of poverty, war and so many other crosses we live with today.

I am encouraged by the invitation to become more open to and curious about the evidence all around me that the spirit in Jesus continues to be alive—even if I cannot explain it with words

I am encouraged to follow the mystic's path in search of an ever-deeper experience of this ongoing spirit as a knowable and life-giving presence empowering us to live into the fullness of the life for which God created every one of us.

Amen

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