

Punctuating Resurrection
An Easter Sermon
by Shelly Davis

Text: John 20:1-18

“I have seen the Lord,” said Mary Magdalene.

“I have seen the Lord.”

Five words.

The first Christian sermon—*ever*.

Preached by a woman who had faithfully followed Jesus since the day seven demons had gone out of her.

Mary, *unwavering* Mary: among the women who gathered near the cross upon which Jesus was killed by those who feared him.

Mary, *vigilant* Mary: watching to see where Jesus’ lifeless body was entombed.

Mary, *urgent* Mary: arriving back at the tomb early—while it was still dark—that first day of the week.

Mary, *startled* Mary: finding the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb and running to get Peter and the other disciple to come and see the empty tomb for themselves.

Mary, *steadfast* Mary: the first one in John's gospel to see the risen Christ.

"I have seen the Lord," said Mary Magdalene.

Simon Peter and the other disciple, this scripture tells us, both

- went *into* the tomb,
- saw the various body and head wrappings that had held Jesus in death,
- verified the emptiness of the tomb—Jesus' body was definitely *not* there—and then
- they went home. **PERIOD.**

Mary, however, was not ready to go home.

So, Mary stayed, and Mary stood weeping outside the tomb—the empty tomb.

- Paralyzed in her grief.
- Puzzled by the emptiness of the tomb. *Was it really empty?*

Mary, in her haste to run and get Peter and the other disciple, had not yet looked inside the tomb herself. So, she bent over to look inside the tomb and there she saw two of God's **COMMAS** in the form of angels in white, sitting in the tomb right where Jesus' body had been.

Mary saw, or felt, or believed, or hoped for a *comma* where two other disciples had seen or felt or believed or experienced a *period*.

Though it was Gracie Allen who first said, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” it was Mary Magdalene who first *lived it* in the post-crucifixion story.

What for so many—including those two other disciples, at least at first—appeared to be the end of the story—a *period*—was instead a *comma*—

- a breathtaking, earth-shaking, curtain-ripping punctuation mark in the history of human meaning-making—
- the *continuation* of a story—
- a salvation story—
- a stunning liberation story of God’s people.

And a tomb that had once been filled with Jesus’ dead body—and then emptied of that body—was now filled again with two other messengers of God who asked Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

After responding to these two angels—

- these two *commas* that God had placed before her—
- with the very same words she had used to urgently summon Peter and the other disciple, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”—

- Mary turned around and saw the biggest *comma* she had ever seen—she saw Jesus standing there . . . but she did not know that it was Jesus.

For even after Jesus had echoed the two angels and asked Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?, and added a new query of his own, “Whom are you looking for?”, Mary still thought she had encountered the gardener and said to Jesus, “Please, if you have carried Jesus away, tell me where you have laid the body, and I will take it away.”

Then Jesus slices through the tears and fog of this faithful, unwavering, urgent, startled, steadfast disciple’s fresh grief and mourning and calls her by name with the volume of an *exclamation mark* that makes her aware of “everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes.”

Poets—

- poets like E.E. Cummings, the Psalmists, Mary Oliver, and countless other poets through the ages—
- have ways of removing many of the **periods** of our sentences and experiences and imaginations
- and opening our hearts and lives to the
 - *commas*,
 - dashes,
 - blank (sometimes empty, sometimes full) spaces, and
 - exclamation marks that point to

- another way of being,
- another way of experiencing,
- another way of seeing and hearing and hoping and loving in the world.

Open your ears and hearts now to the entirety of E.E. Cummings' untitled poem, commonly known by its first line,

"I thank You God for this most amazing"

i thank You God for this most amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

E. E. Cummings' poetic rendering of gratitude to God for all that "is"

- dances around and within the idea of resurrection,
- dances around and within the idea of encountering a risen teacher and friend,
- dances around and within the possibility of
 - that which is natural (human?) also being
 - that which is infinite (divine?) also being
 - that which is yes (both?)

Resurrection is not so much about missing bodies as it is about restoring relationships.

- When the risen Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name, she knows who Jesus is: "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).
- This is my teacher.
- This is my friend.

And because Mary's relationship with the risen Christ is now restored—

- brought back to life—
- "everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes"—
- this *restored* relationship—can lead to other restored relationships.
 - Go to my disciples, my brothers and sisters.
 - Share what you have experienced and seen and heard and believed.
 - Say to them, "I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Jesus' relationship with God is restored as his spirit returns to the wholeness—*the infinite yes*—which is God.

And this return to wholeness—

- this resurrection—
- this *transformation* from “what was” to “what is now” —
- this **comma**—
- this *series of commas, or is it an ellipsis?*—opens the story
 - for those who are to follow—
 - for us—
 - for Jesus' Father and God is also our Father and God and Mother and Creator and Source of Life.
 - Jesus' “infinite yes” is our “infinite yes.”

Yes, “God is still speaking,”

- in the once and always risen Christ,
- in the witness of Mary Magdalene, and countless witnesses to resurrection throughout the ages
- in the gift of the Holy Spirit to the body of the living Christ that is the church,
- in you and in me

Gracie Allen got it so right,
“Never place a period
where God has placed a comma,”

And in every hallelujah—

- shouted, sung,
- wept or whispered—
- we dive deeper into punctuating resurrection for ourselves, for

“how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—
lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?”

[E.E. Cummings]

Thanks be to God!

Hallelujah!

Amen (*comma*)