

Instruments of His Resurrecting Love

(Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:5-11; John 20:1-18)

Jesus was dead. His lifeless body had been sealed in a tomb. His followers were in a state of grief, no doubt suffering from a multitude of conflicting feelings, such as sorrow, anger, loneliness, sadness, shame, anxiety, and guilt. In The Gospel According To John, the reality of all this sorrow and mourning is focused on one person, Mary Magdalene.

At some point in his ministry, Jesus healed Mary Magdalene of some illness. And after that, she became one of his faithful followers. In Aramaic, the name "magdala" means "elevated, great, magnificent." She seems to have been a woman of means, for she had money that she used to help support Jesus and his disciples. The depth of her love for and commitment to Jesus, however, was shown not only in the financial support she gave Jesus but also in her constant presence at his side. When it became dangerous to be associated with Jesus, when the disciples turned away from Jesus, Mary Magdalene never left Jesus' side. She was with him while he suffered and died on the cross and when he was laid in the tomb. In fact, according to the gospels, Mary Magdalene was the only person who was a witness to Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb. Perhaps no one was more faithful to or loved Jesus better than Mary Magdalene.

So, it's no wonder that in the Gospel According to John, the grief of the Jesus movement is focused on Mary Magdalene. And, it's no wonder that in all four gospels, Mary Magdalene is the first person to whom the Resurrected Lord appears.

Before it was even light, Mary was up and at the tomb to mourn her beloved teacher. When she saw that the stone that had sealed Jesus' tomb had been rolled away, she ran and told Simon Peter and John that someone had stolen Jesus' body. The two disciples came, saw that the tomb was empty, and then returned to their homes. But faithful Mary Magdalene remained. She stood outside the tomb, crying that now even her beloved Lord's dead body had been taken from her. When she sensed that she was not alone and turned around, she saw a man she assumed was the gardener. She said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." The stranger answered by speaking her name: "Mary." She recognized the voice; it was the voice that had healed her, called her, taught

her. Tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy. She who had been dead in her sorrow was suddenly alive.

Easter is our celebration of Jesus' resurrection, and it's our celebration of the life beyond the grave that we anticipate for our loved ones and for ourselves, as we remember how Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). But Easter is also a celebration of the spiritual resurrection that we, like Mary Magdalene, can have right here and right now. As the Apostle Paul expressed it, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

Robert McAfee Brown, an American professor, once gave a beautiful example of this new life that we can have right here and right now. It seems that there was a Navy transport with 1500 Marines on board who were being brought back to the United States from Japan for discharge. On the second day out, a small group of the Marines came to the chaplain, asking him to lead them in a Bible study class each morning. Toward the end of the trip, the group read the 11th chapter of John, which describes the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When the discussion was over, a Marine corporal followed the chaplain back to his cabin. After a few false starts, he got to the point, saying, "Chaplain, I felt as though everything we read this morning was pointed right at me. I've been living in hell for the last six months, and for the first time, I feel as though I've gotten free." As he talked, the story came out. He had just finished high school when he was called into the service. He had spent a long time in the occupation forces in Japan. He had gotten bored and had gone off one night with some friends and gotten into trouble. Serious trouble. Fortunately, no one else knew about it. But he knew about it. And he was sure God knew about it. He felt guilty, terribly guilty. And each day the ship got nearer to San Francisco, his feeling increased that he had ruined his life, that his life was over, that he'd never be able to face his family again. He told the chaplain, "Up until today, I've been a dead man. I have felt utterly condemned by myself, by my family (if they knew), and by God. I've been dead. But now, after reading about Jesus and Lazarus, I know that I am alive again. The forgiveness of God can reach out even to me. The resurrection Jesus was talking about is a

real thing, after all, right now." Yes, part of the good news of Easter is that God offers us new life right now.

But the importance of this day doesn't stop even here. It's not only about Jesus' resurrection, our resurrection after death, and our resurrection right now. It's also about the resurrection work that our Resurrected Lord gives to each one of us.

After Mary Magdalene's tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy, after, suddenly, fully aware of God's love and power, she burst from her tomb of sorrow into new joyful life, Mary Magdalene wanted to hug her Resurrected Lord. But Jesus told her not to hold him, not to keep him to herself, but rather to go take the good news of his resurrection to others. And faithful Mary Magdalene did just as Jesus asked her to do, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." It was Mary Magdalene who first proclaimed our Risen Savior. Mary Magdalene was the apostle to the apostles. And can't you just imagine how her words of Jesus' resurrection, testifying to God's love and power, brought resurrection to those weary, defeated, sorrowful souls who heard them?

Every time the Risen Lord appeared to others, in the hours and days that followed, his message to them was similar. They were to go to others and themselves become God's instruments of resurrecting love. Just listen to the words of the Risen Lord..."Do not be afraid...Make disciples...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you....Remember, I am with you always...Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation...You are my witnesses....Feed my lambs.....Tend my sheep.....Feed my sheep."

Friends, it's important that we're here to celebrate Jesus' resurrection...to celebrate that the cruelty and suffering of this world did not have the last word....that God's love and light prevailed against the world's hate and darkness. It's important that we're here to celebrate our belief and hope that for everyone who faithfully follows Jesus, there is also resurrection beyond the grave. It's important that we're here to celebrate the new life that can be ours today. But, it's not enough that we just be here today, at the empty tomb, basking in the personal joy we feel over Jesus' physical resurrection, the physical resurrection we anticipate for our loved ones and

for ourselves, and the spiritual new life that can be ours. Here at the empty tomb, Jesus tells us, just as he told Mary and the disciples, to take the good news of his resurrection to others, so that they too may experience resurrection right where they're at, right now. For isn't that the way Jesus himself lived his life?

Resurrection wasn't just something that happened to Jesus at the end of his life. Jesus' physical resurrection was the crowning event in his life that had been about resurrection all along. Jesus lived his life as God's instrument of resurrecting love. With God's love, Jesus constantly, wherever he went, reached out to others, offering them resurrection, God's resurrection, that resurrection God had wanted for his people all along, that resurrection even pictured way back in the Older Testament days, in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.

When Jesus took the time to talk respectfully, without prejudice, without judgment, to the Samaritan woman at the well, he gave her **hope** and through that hope, he gave her resurrection. She had been spiritually dead when she went to the well at noon, in the heat of the day, so as to avoid everyone. But after encountering Jesus, when she left the well, she ran to others, fully alive for the first time in years. When Jesus spoke words of **justice** to the crowd on the mountain, telling them that there was a blessing in their poverty, in their mourning, in their meekness, in their hunger and thirst, in their mercy, in their purity of heart, in their peacemaking, and in their persecution for righteousness' sake, he gave them resurrection. When Jesus showed **compassion** to society's untouchables, the lepers, how marvelous was the new life that came to them. When Jesus told the woman of ill repute who washed his feet with her tears that her sins were **forgiven**, she had a chance at new life. When Jesus told his anxious disciples that he would be with them always, in giving them **peace**, he helped them break free of their tombs of fear.

When Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go." Everything Jesus did was about unbinding people who were spiritually dead, wrapped in death shrouds, either of their own making or of society's making, so that they could live fuller and more abundant life than ever before--resurrection life. Jesus was their savior, the one who saved

them from their death walk in this world, the one who through deeds of love made their dry dead bones come together and live again.

All around us, there are people--loved ones, neighbors, strangers--who need resurrection. And, friends, every time we offer one of them compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, or hope, we are God's instrument of resurrecting love. Every time we do something to shatter the tombs of homelessness, poverty, sexism, elder abuse, violence, and war, we are God's instrument of resurrecting love. Every time we swing a hammer building a Habitat house, every time we give money to Week of Compassion, every time we take the time to listen to a child or someone in a nursing home, every time we speak a word of encouragement to someone, we are God's instrument of resurrecting love.

I'm going to challenge myself this Easter to make a conscious effort to be God's instrument of resurrecting love at least three times each day. I'm going to carry with me this string of three "resurrection beads." And every time I speak a word of encouragement or offer someone compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, or hope, I'll move one of the beads. And hopefully I'll have moved all three by the time I go to bed each night. I want to challenge you to do the same by offering you a string of resurrection beads. As we sing the next hymn, I'll pass out a string of resurrection beads to anyone who would like to join me in this commitment of consciously trying to live our lives as Jesus did, as "instruments of God's resurrecting love." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; April 4, 2010 (Easter)