

Easter  
John 20:1-18

After Jesus' death, as the story in the Gospel of John tells it, Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' friends, came alone to the tomb. Where Jesus' body had been, now, there was nothing. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," she said sobbing.

Do you ever feel like that: left alone, full of questions, grieving?

It can happen in life.  
It can happen in religion.

Life itself, loss of a job, death of a loved one, illness, can knock us flat. And we don't know where to turn.

And change seems to be all around us. Even new knowledge can rock our faith.

The knowledge that the Bible was written over time, that the Bible does not mention eye witnesses to the resurrection, unfortunately causes some people to question the truth of the resurrection.

Or take science, for example, the discovery that the world was created in sixteen billion years, and not literally in seven days as one creation story in Genesis relates, undermines some people's faith in God.

Again, increased knowledge of humanity's propensity for evil, especially in the past century (the Nazi holocaust, abuse of the environment, church scandals) raises one of the deepest questions that people have always asked throughout time: where is God in the face of innocent suffering? Why can't God diminish or eradicate evil?

And, finally, just to mention one more aspect of people's reluctance to embrace so called organized religion: the tendency of some groups of religious people to feel that they have a truth that others don't have makes them appear hypocritical and self-righteous; their seeming inability to question, to wonder; to listen to other views can turn others away from religion all together.

But, the good news, as I see it, is that to ask, grow, doubt, question is part of mature religious growth. Why?

Because it's a mistake to think that God ever can be known as we know other things in this world.

Tragically, many people don't grow beyond their childhood view of God, which pictures God as a being like a human being, only more so, grander, larger, who controls events.

But when life changes, drastically, or we change, that picture of God is not enough. It falls apart. We either move to another picture, a deeper understanding, or abandon God.

In the Bible God is mysterious, beyond knowing.

God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, giving his name as Yahweh: translated as "I am who am." Or "I will be who I will be" (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as wind blowing where it chooses (John 3:8).

Christianity claims that Jesus was and is the best we can know of God; Jesus loved, and healed, and sought out and loved those people whom society diminished. But he was different enough in his life, from the Messiah people expected that, although people were curious, still they did not, many of them, follow him.

And, Mary who loved him deeply, didn't recognize him after his resurrection. God changes, and we change.

Not recognizing can be hard. God calls us to new places in ourselves and in life, to become better, bigger, people.

Change is good and painful.

Scientists speak with awe of the hidden parts of the universe, making up much of the universe, as dark matter. Just last Wednesday, scientists at the world's biggest physics machine buried in tunnels in the Swiss/French countryside, after decades of trying, successfully collided protons at 99 percent of the speed of light. Their goal is to peer into the beginning of the universe and discover more about the Big Bang. They're also trying to find "the identity of the dark matter that shapes the visible cosmos."

Now, this is incredible, as those of us who have recently lost something can attest: to try to discover the dark matter of the universe.

Parts of us are "dark matter," waiting to be discovered by God, and by us.

The male disciples saw the empty tomb, believed something, and left. How many of us are like that, approach and avoidance to trusting more deeply, to religion itself, not knowing if we want to draw closer or to pull away.

But, Mary, like the scientists in their quest for the origins of the universe, stays close to her quest. She doesn't give up.

Those times when we don't recognize God but hope for more, more meaning, more love, more justice, more beauty, more knowledge, we are in the garden, like Mary and the Gardener is near.

If we don't run away from questions and doubts and hope, but stay where we found meaning before, we have good reason to believe that God will speak.

We may not all hear Jesus speak to us as did Mary. Perhaps it's a song that has meaning, or a time we've understood something deep, or a dream; and things change forever.

"Mary" Jesus said. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). She was found, and a new life begins.

Mary changed; we will change.

If we respond to God, who is the center of love.

We will recognize hypocrisy, and wrongs, yes, and still have questions, too, but we will have compassion, and new life purpose.

The great paradox is that as we come close to God (who has been described as the "love whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere"), we actually come closer to ourselves and to others, into community. The story line moves forward, it is not about them, who ever they may be ("they have taken him") but about I and you and us, about community. Jesus calls Mary by name, and says tell the others, "I am going to my father and your father, to your God and my God."

You think you're alone, but you're not; you may feel lost, just when you are closest to being found.

And, you will be asked to walk and talk, and a new community begins. As Karen Armstrong, British author of numerous works on comparative religion, writes in *The Case for God*, all great religions share this: that to follow them into their depths means to give up barriers to closeness (bias, we/they dichotomy); to move into presence, loving kindness, empathy, compassion, love.

And, they involve work.

Religious work involves compassion (walking in the others' shoes), and disciplines such as working for justice, attending worship where rituals are shared, using our minds to learn about creation and the world, asking questions. Asking questions, knowing that God includes our thinking but is beyond it, too, that belief means trust and commitment. Finally, religion (from *religio*, which means to rebind) means allowing ourselves to be changed by love; to live fully, to be really alive; to find life with meaning and possibility.

In a good religious community, people accept us as we are and hope that we will become even more whom we are meant to be in God's love; wherever we are it's OK.

Christians grow into believing that Jesus was restored to life and eternal life and that he can share that with those who believe in him. Discovering that life, experiencing that life, is richer and fuller than any one of us can imagine. Discovering that you are important, (just think of it, Mary, a woman, a second class citizen, was the first preacher) that you can have a voice, that you can tell the world what is deepest in your heart, how eternal life comes to you today.

The resurrection means that God always intends and will succeed, with our help, in bringing life out of death, hope out of darkness, love into despair; justice for those who are vulnerable and oppressed.

Far from easy, true religious devotion is one of the most demanding commitments in life.

Yet, it's a paradox that religion can finally bring us home, where we can rest.

Paul Tillich: "The Yoke of Religion," "Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to him. Nothing is demanded of you—no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. But what is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being, the being of love and justice and truth, as it is manifest in Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light" (in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, [1948], p. 102).

Be yourself, question, become whom you are meant to be. And let a good Christian community be part of your life.

Harriet Tubman, deeply Christian, born a slave, in 1820, escaped, and helped to bring seventy slaves through thirteen missions through the Underground Railway. She always had immense courage, and faced large rewards out for her capture. The slaves whom she rescued called her Moses. She said: "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, patience, and passion to reach the stars, to change the world."

Happy Easter.

Pastor Nancy Wright  
Ascension Lutheran Church  
April 4, 2010