

FEARLESS



A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie J. Nagley, Easter Day, April 16, 2017 at St Luke's Bethesda, Maryland

There's a controversy going on that has nothing to do with foreign policy or politics. The dust up is not even in Washington, D.C. The problem is in New York City. It's all about the statue of the "Fearless Girl" who is staring down the statue of "Charging Bull" of Wall Street.

Since the 1980s the bull has been the symbol of the financial district's vibe. A hard charging, unrelenting, and too big to take down beast. The statue of the bull came about in 1987 when the market had a severe downturn and was in desperate need of optimism. Arturo Di Modica, an Italian artist, paid for and made the bull himself and then in the middle of the night deposited the 7,000-pound creation in front of the New York Stock Exchange.

The place where the Fearless Girl and the bull stand in opposition to one another is called Evacuation Day Plaza. The plaza honors the moment in 1783 when George Washington marched back into Manhattan as the Revolutionary War ended because of the Great Fire that came between the British and retreating American army. It is said that an official in London blamed that fire on a woman who was found in the ruins covered with "every mark of rage, despair, resolution and the most exulted heroism".¹

I tell you all that because it strikes me that the fearless girl and the backstory of her is very much like what we have in the story of Mary Magdalene and the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene is that woman standing in the ruins with every mark of rage, despair, resolution and heroism.

¹ Gail Collins, NYT April 15, 2017 "'Fearless Girl' Doesn't Need Any Bull"

The church built its own legend of Mary Magdalene, eroding her fearlessness by casting her as a prostitute who Jesus saved. There's no evidence that Mary was the painted woman the church painted her to be. What Mary Magdalene did do was go against convention. She didn't keep quiet. She didn't follow tradition. Instead she chose to follow Jesus even to his death.

It was Mary Magdalene who went to the tomb to tend his body. It was Mary who would hear his voice and be the first to see the risen Christ. It was Mary Magdalene who would tell the others what she had seen.

Mary Magdalene is at the center of the Easter story. She was there at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. She was there through it all, taking in the pain, dealing with the death, fearlessly letting it all in.

When she got to the tomb it was empty. She ran to Peter and the others. They came looked around and left. But Mary stayed.

She stayed. It's not a small detail. Often it's in the willingness to stay and not do anything that brings us the most astonishing realizations. The willingness to stay and not fix what we don't like. The willingness to just stay and not change the subject. The willingness to stay and not run away. The willingness to stay and look at the wreckage.

The preacher and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes about being invited to a student's 'birthday party'.² She went to the address he gave her. It was a Church. She soon realized this wasn't the usual birthday party but an AA meeting where he was celebrating another year of sobriety.

Taylor doesn't relate the stories she heard there for what's said there is meant to stay inside the room. But she did talk, in general, about what she heard. And what she heard were stories of people who were willing to look at the wreckage of their lives and the new life they found. What she heard over and over again were stories about death and resurrection.

They talked about the death of relationships, jobs and even the death of their bodies as drugs and alcohol ravaged them. And then, each them would recall a moment of clarity, some moment when they 'came to' and realized they were dying or dead and didn't they didn't want that anymore. They didn't use religious language but crosses and empty tombs were all around. They didn't use religious language but each talked about an epiphany, a revelation, a mysterious clarity that they couldn't have summoned on their own. It just happened.

With that clarity came a choice. They could ignore the mysterious breaking open. They could take another drink or snort another line, or shoot up but they couldn't ignore that something had broken open in them. They couldn't ignore that new life was available to them. They couldn't ignore that the mysterious came and was standing before them. The people in that

² Taylor, Barbara Brown, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation," *Journal for Preachers*, 2002.

room who hadn't run away found a community, a community of mercy that knew what they knew and could encourage them to go on. If you to see Easter in real time you can see resurrection in those kind stories.

Like Mary grieving at an empty tomb and those people at the AA meeting we all have things going on in our lives that are death dealing. There are things in our lives that are killing us. Maybe it's a job or a relationship or the what we're doing to our bodies. Maybe it's a secret addiction. Maybe it's a quiet despair and loneliness.

We need the Easter in our lives as individuals and as a community. We need Easter as a collective of people who share this earth world. As country, as a world, we may need Easter more than ever. We need to look up and see Jesus so we can move with grace and truth, compassion and peace. We need that mysterious claim on our lives. We need to be open to the mystery. In doesn't matter whether we call to Jesus or God, we need to call to the mystery and see the clarity that makes us reach for responses to worldly things that trouble us in ways that are life-giving. We need to bring small pieces of heaven to earth if we are to keep from blowing up or choking to death this precious planet of ours.

All that is true, and yet, I confess to you my Easter brothers and sisters, that I'm often an inconsistent mess. I want to be full of kindness and peace but when the relief pitcher comes out of the bullpen gives up a homerun or when the other team scores with bunts on my Nationals I'm anything but peaceful and kind.

When someone despicable, like Assad, rains poison on children I'm all for the CIA or Navy Seals or whoever takes on such awful burdens to take him down even though I know that won't solve the problem. And even though I'm not big on guns if someone were threatening my family I might not be so convicted.

I confess that to you like someone stands up in an AA meeting and tells their story. I confess. I want to give all my heart to my better angels but I can't always find them. I can't always find them so I have to fall into the mercy of God and a community who knows the story, too, and knows the precious gift of mercy.

When Mary saw Jesus he told her not to hold onto to him. That, too, was act of mercy for it made her go back to the community and share with them the new life she saw, the truth of resurrection, the way God had taken the horror of a Good Friday and turned it into Easter. When she went back and told that story the people began to see and experience of the risen Christ. Over time and through garden experiences of their own these earlier followers of Jesus, turned their despair and anger into a community that we call the body of Christ, a living, breathing body that does its best, its imperfect best to be a body of hope, mutuality and mercy, extravagant hospitality, radical love and resurrection.

I take some consolation in the fact that on that first Easter morning the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene. She was an unlikely choice. The fearless girl with tears in her eyes and knees

weak with grief was the first to see Jesus. She wasn't the harlot the church would paint her to be but she wasn't the holiest person around. None of them were. They were just a bunch of misfits looking for something more to graft their lives on to, something that would help them make sense and make better the circumstances in which they found themselves and the mess of the world they lived in.

In our human experience we are bumped around by missteps and moral ambiguity but as Nadia Bolz-Weber said³ it's good to know Jesus never once, "scanned the room for the person who was the holiest and send that person" be a witness to love and life. Instead, Jesus tapped real people, people who stumble along doing the best they are able. Now we're those people, the ragtag bunch of misfits, full of good intentions with Good Friday suffering and Easter hopes standing in another garden wondering what to do. Just waiting. Just staying.

So I give you two flotation devices to cling to as you do your best in this crazy, messy world of ours. The first is this: Even in our missteps and uncertainty, God loves us. All of us. God loves even those parts we pray no one ever sees and those parts we're afraid to look at. God loves us even when we don't love God back. God just loves us and that is that. That's what stood before Mary Magdalene in the garden. It was love.

I like to imagine Mary Magdalene standing before Peter and the others with her hands on her hips staring at them and telling them what she had seen. For them it was the clarity they needed, the mysterious kind of clarity that comes out of the blue, the moment when a piece of heaven breaks off and falls to earth. In was then they knew what love really looked like, a love that wouldn't be stopped by a cross, a love so powerful it could go to death and back again so that they could go on.

The other flotation device is this, this truth, this enduring truth: Christ is risen and you are part of the rising. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.



³ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*