

Message: Calm in the storm

It’s a beautiful day! The sun has risen on a gorgeous day in southern California. The birds are singing, the morning is cool and the day promises to be sunny and warm. We have a lot to look forward to on this Sunday, the first day of the week.

Not all days are so pleasant. Some are filled with storm clouds, those that promise cold, wet rain and wind, and those that promise chaos, turmoil and change. Storms bring uncertainty into our lives. We can’t control storms any more than we can control the wind and rain. The lack of control makes us feel like leaves on the wind, blown here and there by forces we can’t see or do anything about. Storms leave us feeling lost, without direction, without peace.

Mary felt like she was in the middle of a great storm on that first Sunday after Passover almost 2,000 years ago. The week began on a high as Jesus rode into Jerusalem in the manner of kings, to the cheers and shouts of *Hosanna!* by his friends and followers. But there was a cloud on the horizon.

During the week, the cloud got bigger and bigger. There were many signs. Jesus told his followers about death and rebirth. Then at dinner on Thursday, Jesus startled the disciples by telling them one of them would betray him. From there, things went downhill quickly.

That’s when the winds of injustice really began to blow. Betrayed by his friend Judas, Jesus was thrown into the maelstrom of politics and the fickleness of the Jerusalem crowds. All the disciples ran away and hid while Peter publically denied knowing Jesus to save his own skin.

Rejected by the crowd and condemned on false charges, Jesus was flogged, humiliated and then led to a hill outside Jerusalem, where he was crucified on a Roman cross between two criminals. A few hours later, a strange darkness covered the land and Jesus died. Some friends took Jesus’ body down, prepared it and put it in a nearby tomb.

The storm was in full force. Jesus’ death during Passover caused great turmoil in Jerusalem. People didn’t know what to think about the death of the great teacher, healer and prophet. Because of Sabbath laws, no one could travel or work on Saturday, but they could talk. And all they

could talk about were the events of the week. Jesus' disciples, family and friends were devastated at his sudden death. How could an innocent man, one who had been revealed as the Messiah, die in such a way, in shame and humiliation before everyone? It just didn't make sense.

When caught in a storm, there are two ways most people react.

First, some take shelter from danger, the wind, rain and chaos that come. That's what the disciples decided to do. They were going to wait and see what was going to come out of the political turmoil that condemned Jesus to death. This reaction is motivated by self-interest.

But there's a second way people react. Some go out into the storm, looking for others. The people who do this are motivated by concern for others. They aren't going to wait for the storms of life to blow over. They want to be involved, to help others out of care and love. That's why Mary Magdalene got up before sunrise on Sunday, the first day of the week, and went to the tomb of Jesus.

Mary's love and concern for Jesus led her into danger, into the storm. We know from Matthew's gospel account (27:64-66) that Pilate had posted guards around the tomb, so no one could come take the body and make false claims. Mary was going to the tomb knowing she was putting herself at risk. Yet she went anyway. She went out of love.

I can't image the shock Mary felt. When she got to the tomb, the very large stone, the one that it took a whole group of men to move, was rolled away! It must have been like a bolt of lightning. What happened? She needed help, so she ran and told Peter and John. The two disciples ran to the tomb and found it empty with Jesus' linen wrappings still inside. They saw, John believed, but they didn't really understand what had happened, so they went home.

Mary was in shock. She just lost her teacher, friend and Lord. She'd come to visit Jesus' grave and now it seemed like even that was being taken away from her. Is it any wonder she stood there, outside the tomb, crying? Mary lost everything. What hope did she have in the storm?

We've all known how Mary felt at least once in our life. Perhaps you felt lost when you were faced with a great challenge. Maybe the storms of life have caused you to lose people who were close to you:

grandparents, parents, your spouse, close friends or even a child. Maybe you've been battling cancer or other debilitating illness or disease. Maybe the storms of life have caused you to lose your job, your home or even your freedom. We all experience the trials and storms of life.

The worst thing about storms is they cause us to doubt. We doubt ourselves. We doubt our decisions. We're uncertain whether we have enough strength and courage to get through the next hour, day, week or year. Worst of all, they cause us to doubt our faith. With faith in God's love, we have hope. When we doubt God's love, our faith is weak, and we lose hope. Without hope, we're lost, alone and feeling down; the perfect recipe for tears. That's what Mary Magdalene was feeling as she stood outside the tomb. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, so she bent over to look for herself.

“Why are you crying?” It's a simple question, but it goes right to the heart of the matter. Mary saw two angels and they asked her, “why are you crying?” The angels knew the situation. They asked Mary the question so she would know it came from God. God sent two messengers so Mary would know God was in control, not the storm.

Mary was still caught up in the storm. In her grief, Mary wasn't thinking or recognizing what was happening. Her emotions were too strong. Mary couldn't grasp what was going on. All she knew was that someone had taken Jesus away, leaving her in misery and pain. We feel the same way when we're faced with the unexpected or when we are faced with bad news that just doesn't stop, but goes on and on and on.

“Why are you crying?” A man standing nearby asked Mary that question. Still gripped with fear and doubt, her reaction shows her uncertainty. Thinking he must be the groundskeeper of the cemetery, Mary just wanted to know where the body has been taken so she can retrieve it. Mary's need for something to hold onto, in this case Jesus' body, finally wins. She doesn't even recognize who is speaking.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” (v16). And everything changed.

He's alive! Jesus, her Teacher, was alive, not dead and lying in the earth! The tomb is empty because Jesus came back to life, just as he promised. With one word, her name, the storm stopped.

Can you imagine Mary's reaction? I can't. It's so far out of our normal, everyday experience that we can't. There's nothing on earth like it. Mary's encounter with the risen Christ was a supernatural event. It's only possible by God's divine power. There's nothing we can ever do to match Jesus' resurrection, no matter how much we try to "science our way" to an answer.

You know the first thing Mary did? She hugged Jesus. We know because Jesus said, "*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father*" (v17). If you or I saw someone we loved standing in front of us, someone we never expected to see again, we'd do the same thing. It's a natural, human response. And you know Jesus must have been smiling the whole time, because he is human and divine.

Jesus came to Mary in the hour of her greatest need, when her heart was breaking, her faith weak and her mind filled with doubt. Jesus appeared to calm the storm in Mary's heart, mind and spirit. Just as he calmed the storm on the sea of Galilee, Jesus calms the storm of fear and doubt we have over life and death. Jesus' words are true, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me*" (Jn 14:1).

God is there for us. No matter how great the storms are that we face in life or what our situation may be, God is there for us. When our heart is broken, when we feel lost and alone, when we feel humiliated and ashamed, when don't know what to do next, Jesus is there. It may be hard to recognize him as he may come to us through a friend, family member or acquaintance. But never fear, for God's love can calm strongest storms. After all he overcame death out of love for us.

Jesus came to Mary for a reason. He uplifted and affirmed her. After all, she went out into the storm, putting herself at risk for love. Jesus affirmed her role in his ministry by giving her a message to share with the rest of the disciples. And so Mary went to them and said, "I have seen the Lord!" What a wonderful thing to share. Will you share it with those you meet today?

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.