

Easter Sunday 2014
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We have a magnet on our refrigerator that says "I know I came into this room for a reason." If you are like me, too often you have a thought in one room, head toward another room to accomplish something related to that thought, enter the second room, only to discover that you have no idea why you are there. Sometimes I even retrace my steps back to where I started, hoping to recapture the original thought. Sometimes that works. And sometimes it doesn't. Has this happened to you? Am I in good company here?

I used to think my forgetfulness was due to age. And perhaps age is in part to blame. But listen to this: a new study from the University of Notre Dame, and this is absolutely true, maybe you have seen it on the news, has found that entering through a doorway serves as a kind of "event boundary", that forces our memory to update itself as a result of moving into new room. It's like our brain creates a new page ready for new experiences and wipes away what we were just thinking or worrying about just by going through a doorway. New brain space for new thoughts and experiences in new places.

I admit, I get annoyed with myself when I forget why I entered a room and have to retrace my steps, but I also find this notion of an "event boundary" rather intriguing. Optimistically, I think of it as a doorway that could clean or wipe away some the nonsense that is taking up space in my brain and prepare me for what is to come - refocusing my attention on what is important. Now that's an interesting idea. What kind of doorway could do that?

Let's consider an example. Suppose that life has brought a prominent young woman some significant setbacks. I don't mean just day-to-day annoyances. I mean major, fundamental disruptions; losses that lead her to question even the very meaning of her life, her purpose. It could have been the loss of a job or the onset of major health problems. But in this case imagine that the loss was of a very significant relationship, in fact the death of a person so close to her, so encircled in her life, that the loss is devastating. Imagine that the person in whom she trusts the most is tragically killed. She has devoted herself to a movement, a hope, a belief, a person, only to have it all come crashing down, dashed by the evidence of common experience, by betrayal, tragedy, and death.

Then imagine that she encounters a doorway, and passes through. And it's not as if she forgets the loss or that the loss is no longer important to her, or didn't happen, or isn't deeply troubling, but what if the meaning of the loss changes? What if walking through that doorway changes how she understands the meaning of her life in relation to that loss? What if it reorients not only her appreciation for what she has had, but also her sense of hope and optimism about what the future will bring, and her part in that future?

By now, perhaps you have guessed that this is not fiction we are talking about. This is the story of a young woman named Mary Magdalene who 2000 years or so ago on the first day of the week, early on a Sunday morning, before the sun had even come up, walked to the grave of Jesus. All that she and the disciples had believed in and hoped in, all that they had invested their lives in, that one person who offered such promise for the future, is dead. What's more,

she then experiences another blow as she approaches the tomb early that morning and sees the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Those who would destroy her faith and confidence have taken away even the body. The evidence that Jesus even existed is gone.

Her story reminds us that the experiences of death and loss, the experience of God's absence, these are the real lived experiences even of this dear, close friend of Jesus. If she experienced this kind of grief, this level of loss and confusion, I have no doubt that we, too, encounter mornings, days, weeks, even months like this. Maybe some of you experienced such feelings and thoughts even this morning. If so, you are, with Mary, in good company.

And Mary Magdalene responds just like we would respond. Many consider her the second most important woman in the New Testament, second only in stature to Mary the mother of Jesus. She is mentioned a dozen or so times in the Gospels, more often than most of the disciples. She stayed with Jesus as he hung dying on the cross even after the other disciples had scattered in fear. Fifteen hundred years ago St. Augustine called her the "Apostle to the Apostles," and a recent theologian called her "first among apostles." She was a clear leader among those who followed Jesus. And she is the one who finds the tomb empty.

Given all this commitment and first hand exposure to Jesus, John's Gospel nevertheless reports that Mary Magdalene responds to that empty tomb just as we would. She is distraught, and she assumes that somebody has moved or stolen the body. She says this to two angels, and then turns and says it to Jesus himself, not recognizing him.

Sometimes we think that people in ancient times were unsophisticated, superstitious, easy prey for charlatans. We sometimes mistakenly think they believed in all kinds of magic, enchantments, or the occult, but Mary believed none of that, and she responds in her grief to these events just like we would respond. She weeps. She finds that the tomb is empty, and so she assumes that somebody must have moved the body.

In fact, almost nobody in Jesus's time, Jews or Romans, believed in what we call the resurrection. If you yourself aren't so sure about the resurrection, or whether such a thing could really happen, you are in good company. Some, like Mary and Martha, believed in a resurrection of all people way off at the end of time. A few people experienced the raising of Lazarus, but Lazarus was raised back into this life. Lazarus was going to die again, and no one was confused about that. Nobody thought that a particular person would be raised from the dead and would manifest God's new creation in the middle of time, and certainly not on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Mary, like us, was not expecting to find anything but a dead body that Sunday morning, and she was doubly upset that somebody had moved it.

And then she looked through a doorway, into a tomb, not knowing that her understanding of the world was about to change. Not knowing that a new page was being written; that former ways of thinking were fading into oblivion like a forgotten thought in a distant room. Beyond her wildest expectation or comprehension, she finds that the body of Jesus has not been stolen, that Jesus is not absent, and that Jesus is not dead. On Sunday morning, the first day of the week, 2000 years ago God steps back into creation in an entirely new, unique,

unexpected, and incomprehensible way, and rescues the world from itself. Nobody predicted it, nobody expected it, nobody new how to understand it. Not even Mary.

If what happened that morning is beyond your experience, beyond your expectation, beyond your comprehension, you are in good company. But Mary's limitations, and our limitations, can not stop God from acting in our history. In this event, God is acting with abandon.

The Gospel lesson tells us that on the first day of that week, Easter morning, God set in motion the dawn of the new creation. By the time the sun came up that morning, something no one could have expected had already happened. Mary Magdalene was still in her grief over the death of Jesus, then in her shock over his missing body, and in those moments she did not understand. She did not yet know that God was already writing a completely new story, with a whole new ending.

Even when she turns and encounters Jesus right in front of her, she does not yet see. Then he says her name and invites her through the doorway. He says her name and she recognizes in that moment that he is neither dead nor missing, but alive to the world in a way that no one anticipated. She is as shocked as anyone could be. Believe me: no one, not Mary Magdalene, not Mary the mother of Jesus, not Martha, not Peter, not John, not the Romans, not the Jews, expected Jesus to step through the doorway of death like this. And so today, Easter morning, we gather to ponder this remarkable event. Today, we are invited to stand next to Mary in front of the doorway to that tomb, and to see what she sees on the other side.

Like Mary, you too may have experienced grief, loss, insecurity, fear, doubt, confusion. You may look right at Jesus and not see him. If that happens, you are in good company. But on Easter morning, Mary sees past all that to the risen Lord, and everything shifts. Today, look with her eyes. Step with her through the doorway and let God help you write the story he has in mind for you as he did for her. He may call you to ministries of care and healing. He may call you to teach the young or the old, to care for the sick, to visit the lonely, to feed the poor, to stand for justice. Step through the doorway and he will loosen the grip of all that holds you back, all that weighs you down. Step through the doorway and he will help you write the next chapter of God's new creation on a new page in a new room.

Two thousand years ago, that's what happened to Mary Magdalene. She was no theologian. She wrote no books. But after the stone was rolled back, and while Peter and John were running hysterically to and fro, Mary looked into the tomb, across the threshold of death, and the weight of life, its losses and disappointments, its setbacks and tragedies, dissolved. For there, through the doorway of the resurrection, she encountered the very presence of God.

Today, ponder that doorway. In what ever way you can, open yourself to the possibility that God has rolled back the stone and set before you a new way to think about the world, a new way to live in hope. Let God help you leave behind the thoughts and memories and criticisms that weighed you down yesterday in some other place, some other room, and refocus your attention on what the world, and the people around you, need from you here, now, today. Walk through the doorway of the resurrection. Because today is Easter. And in all of human history, there is nothing like this. Amen.