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**Appearances: Easter 2 (John 20: 19-31)**

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In the earliest historical accounts of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, there were no accounts of Jesus appearing post-resurrection to his disciples. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, tells the reader that Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb and encountered a young man who announced to them that Jesus was risen and in Galilee, but they were afraid even to tell anyone, let alone go and see him. It is only in the longer ending appended to the original story (Mark 16:9-20) that Jesus appears to Mary and others. Similarly, there are scholars who argue that the more original text of 1 Corinthians 15 did not contain Paul talking about Jesus appearing to Cephas, then to the 12, and then to more than 500 brothers and sisters, then to James, then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself – that this passage seems to have been inserted, at a later date, to strengthen Paul’s argument against those Jesus followers who did not believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Finally, the Gospel of Peter, an early Christian writing that did not make it into our Bibles, is believed to contain the earliest ‘witness’ to the Passion Narrative, and it also contains no stories of Jesus’ appearances.

Because the Jesus appearance stories are found in later texts: the Gospel of John, Matthew and Luke, but not in earlier texts, it is possible they were included, in part, to provide ‘proof’ that Jesus had really risen from the dead, and to contribute to the ancient theological debates about what kind of resurrected body he had. Therefore, when Jesus appeared to Mary, the other disciples and Thomas – they immediately believed he was alive. We also read that he had a meal with his disciples and ate a piece of broiled fish in the Gospel of Matthew (clearly having a flesh and blood kind of body),

that he walked through doors to stand amongst his disciples in the Gospel of John (a non-worldly body), and that he promised the disciples they could pick up snakes without being bitten and drink poisonous beverages without dying in the later addition to the Gospel of Mark.

This apologetic and other-worldly aspect of these later stories makes me want to say, “[the later Gospel writers] protest too much, me thinks.”

Is there a way, I found myself wondering, to think about Jesus’ appearances to the disciples that is not primarily about girding up proof of his divinity? Meanings and experiences, perhaps, that are not recorded for us to read because they did not seem ‘fit for public biblical consumption’, those ‘behind the scenes’ experiences that exist in the gap between the tragedy of the ending of the Gospel of Mark, and the triumphant ending of the Gospel of John. Instead of telling the story about Jesus, what if I tried to tell a story about the disciples? What if I tried to put myself into the shoes of the disciples whose beloved Master has been murdered, and yet is reportedly risen? Might new meanings of Jesus’ appearances arise?

The Voice of Mary:

I was so overwhelmed with grief that I could not eat, I could not sleep...nothing mattered to me anymore. My hope for a different kind of life – one with real love in it – was shattered. My heart was ripped in shreds, and I thought, if I can at least see his body, if I can at least sit with him, and talk with him for a moment, I will be able to feel him still with me. So I took a walk to the tomb, but it was empty. I saw no sign of him to comfort me. Even if something had been there, I wouldn’t have seen anything through my tears. I even asked the gardener if he knew where they had taken him. I wish I could explain to you how I felt so ripped apart from him....

And then, even as I continued to sob, I heard his voice, “Mary”, “Mary”, “Mary” --- he

had always said it so softly like this --- I knew it was him. I could see him – I could feel him – he still knew me by name, he still saw me. Do you know that feeling? You wear a kind of ‘mask’ to protect yourself from people’s judgment – and then someone comes along who not only sees beyond that mask, but sees the best in you, and speaks your name with such tenderness that life takes on new meaning? That was how Jesus had treated me, so when he appeared to me, just like that, I knew he was still alive – and when he appears to me now, when I turn my mind to him – he always says so tenderly, “Mary”. Just that Mary. And I have renewed strength to continue, to carry on his way of loving even those they murdered him.

### The Voice of the Male Disciples

We were hiding inside a locked room, hiding from the small group of Judean authorities who were in cahoots with the Romans. Have you ever been this terrified that you wish you could make yourself invisible? We were convinced they would discover us, and we would be the next insurgents to be murdered, to be crucified. Jesus had told us we would have to give up our life to save our life, but we didn’t want to die. We couldn’t do it. And even though we were wracked with guilt for abandoning him, we were paralyzed by our terror. Jesus had always been the courageous one – and we loved his courage, his strength – we relied on it, but now he was gone, and all we had was this locked door between us and the murderers outside and, of course, the deep regret of our broken promises.

Then we heard his soft and loving voice again – the one who kind of chuckled at our fear, and used that voice you use to soothe a fretting baby that just won’t settle: Peace/Calmness/ Be with You, and we stopped trembling for just a minute, and we stopped beating ourselves up for being failures, because he didn’t judge us, he didn’t berate us – he just stood there, a source of calmness. Here we are, a pathetic huddle of

anxiety and self-loathing – having failed him over and over again – and he wants to comfort us, and to remind us of our commission. Can you believe it? He still believes in us. Of course he believed in us – isn't that what he was always about? But it is so easy to forget that. His confidence in us was combined with responsibility – and we knew, maybe not today, maybe not even next week, but soon we would have to dive off that high diving board into the threatening waters. And over and over again, he would appear, and just say again, "Peace/Calm/Comfort" to us, and it would steady us, those anxious voices would subside, and just the memory that he knew we could do it, despite how obtuse and doubting we have been (and would continue to be) – it became a source of inner strength. He was still with us.

### The Voice of Thomas

I am not like the others. I usually stay in the background of things, observing, listening, watching. So often I am misunderstood – for instance, they are calling me the Doubting Thomas, but it wasn't that I doubted him. Mary shared her grief with me and told me he called her name, but I didn't want to hear his voice, I needed to feel him. I know it sounds kind of morbid, but I needed to touch the holes in his hands, put my own hand in the ragged wound in his side. It wasn't that I didn't believe he would always be with me 'in spirit', but I was afraid he would become just a bunch of ideas, that others would talk about him as if he wasn't even human – that I would look back on his life and forget that he touched lepers, that he let diseased and people touch him, that he had let me touch him. I was afraid that he would become just a set of disembodied ideologies and theologies. A high in the sky God who lived in elaborate houses far away from the ghetto, far away from those of us who aren't even considered 'human' in the eyes of Roman law – far from those of us who don't have the fancy clothes—far from the women amongst us who are used by their slave masters and beaten by their husbands – far from the eunuchs who aren't even allowed in the doors. So, when he appears to me

– he tells me I can put my fingers into the holes in his hands, and I can feel where they have abused his body – and be reminded that he still knows the degradation and abuse many of us have known – he hasn't left that behind. Even if most people around me are forgetting that, I can still touch the truth of his wounds. It is not just that he can understand my pain – it's that most of the world believes that anyone with any kind of wound or 'blemish' or 'uncleanness' isn't even worthy to participate in the community of faith (unless they keep those wounds under wraps), and yet, God has raised up a wounded, despised and murdered Master as Messiah. Doesn't that just blow the Empire's logic to smithereens? Just think of it --- just like Jesus -- those of us who are lowly, degraded, poor, diseased, and cast out by the rulers in the Empire and the Temple are the ones who are called to co-create a new *Kindom*. I would never be able to believe it if he didn't continually appear to me, and let me touch his wounds.

Like the disciples, we cannot continually journey from threatenedness toward resurrection life, I suspect, unless we allow God: through Jesus' words, the stories of his way of living, and his vision of the radically inclusive *Kindom* of God to appear to us in our grief, in our fear and anxiety, in our woundedness, that is, in our life behind the scenes... in the spaces between tragedy and triumph.

And so I have asked myself this week, "Where, specifically, behind the scenes, like Mary, do I need to hear the words of Jesus? How, like the disciples, do I need comfort in my fear? Do I, like Thomas, need to touch his wounds again? And will I open my heart to actually allow the Divine One to appear to me?"

Will you?

Amen