

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Easter Sunday Celebration – March 27, 2016

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 24:1-12

REFLECTION

“Inconsistency on the part of pastors and the faithful between what they say and what they do, between word and manner of life, is undermining the Church's credibility.”

— Pope Francis, (b.1936) Argentinian, 266th and current Pope of the Roman Catholic Church

Who Do We Believe?

You have probably heard any number of times how women in ancient times were not considered full citizens and could not legally serve as witnesses. You've probably heard this version of Easter Morning events where the women go – a few days late due to circumstances – to prepare Jesus' body for burial – find the tomb empty except for a couple of divine messengers of G-d and – when reporting to the disciples – are not believed. Frustrating for sure.

But then who could believe such a story? Angels? Resurrection? Fulfilment of Jesus' own prediction? Well – these people are the same disciples who witnessed miracles during Jesus' ministry – miracles of healing and water walking and food multiplication. So why not a post-mortem miracle? And what about Jesus' insistence that women were equal to men in discussion, at the table, in divine citizenship? Hmmmm.

Well – it might be interesting to note that among the ancient texts found near Akhmim in upper Egypt in the late nineteenth century – now labeled the Berlin Gnostic Codex – is the most complete surviving fragment of the Gospel of Mary.

<http://gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>

And this writing describes Mary of Magdala in the following ways:

- She is prominent among the followers of Jesus
- She speaks boldly
- She plays a leadership role among the disciples
- She is a visionary
- She is praised for her superior understanding
- She is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus
- She is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male disciples
- She is defended by other male disciples

Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Westar Institute, Spring 2013

The Gospel of Mary is not part of our Canon – a library selected by the church hierarchy (all men) in the fourth century. They preserved hints of Mary Magdalene's role in the Jesus Movement and the egalitarian attitudes of Jesus. But the Gospel of Mary would have been too controversial – as was Mary herself – as the Gospel of Mary points out. So if we understand that the male disciples were divided about Mary from the beginning – this canonical text about not believing her story about the Resurrection fits right in.

But this story also tells us that Peter – one seriously flawed individual with some regrets about his own behavior – Peter might have had a clue that Mary was telling the truth. Because he went to the graveyard to check it out. And he found at least the empty tomb story to be true. In a way, this is Peter's redemption story – as he comes to believe something his conflicted male companions cannot bring themselves to accept – especially when females are the ones reporting.

The thing is – we all know women have only recently (in the long fall of time) gained some rights as citizens and are still facing down the monsters of misogyny in our enlightened society. We have a presidential candidate that is nowhere near the status and character of Mary Magdalene – but arguably has many of the same qualities listed above:

- She is prominent among politicians
- She speaks boldly
- She plays a leadership role
- She is a visionary (according to those who appreciated her efforts toward health care coverage back in the '90's)
- She is praised for her intellect (otherwise she wouldn't have been chosen to serve as Secretary of State)
- She is identified as the intimate or friendly companion of past and current presidents
- She is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male members of congress
- She is defended by other male members of congress

To all of America – not only does she have to prove her presidential-ness – but she also has to fight her way, step by step, through a gauntlet of lies, character assassinations, dismissive attitudes and systemic exclusion of women in powerful

places. People in her own party have decided to believe much of what her enemies have said about her – disciples divided – in conflict with each other and within themselves – about what and whom to believe. All I am saying here is that, although we've come a long way baby, not much has changed in 2000 years.

As always, even on the day of Resurrection and New Life – we have to look closely to find signs of Hope. And we do find them in unlikely places. And they teach us to think outside of our personal world views. What are some of those signs here?

- People who are in vulnerable states – grieving, broken – are sensitive to events that occur in “thin places” – those places and times when the boundaries between this world and the spirit world communicate with one another. They see and experience things the rest of us might not be sensitive to.
- Vulnerable or suffering or marginalized people have access to a different kind of truth and speak it – whether or not we want to hear it.
- People who are the least likely to be trusted – people who have made poor choices and lied and betrayed their friends – can be redeemed. They can, in their own remorse, find and support the perspectives of those who have been crushed by society.

A modern example of a “Peter” moment might be Presidential candidate Paul Ryan who, on March 23rd, made these remarks (reported by Sojourner's):

"There was a time when I would talk about a difference between 'makers' and 'takers' in our country, referring to people who accepted government benefits. But as I spent more time listening, and really learning the root causes of poverty, I realized I was wrong. 'Takers' wasn't how to refer to a single mom stuck in a poverty trap, just trying to take care of her family. Most people don't want to be dependent. And to label a whole group of Americans that way was wrong. I shouldn't castigate a large group of Americans to make a point."

<https://sojo.net/articles/watch-paul-ryan-publicly-repents-past-comments-about-poor>

These are the signs of hope that we need to find and focus on in dark times – times that come cyclically and inevitably – as human civilization cycles toward its own destruction or redemption.

And this is as true of the institution of the church as it is the rest of human civilization. As surprising as it is for me – a long-time critic of Roman Catholic dogma and papal

practices – I find signs of hope for us in the person and message of the current Roman Catholic Pope Francis. For instance, on Maundy Thursday:

[he] washed and kissed the feet of Muslim, Christian and Hindu refugees as a 'gesture of brotherhood'.

“We have different cultures and religions, but we are brothers and we want to live in peace,” he said.

Several of the migrants wept as Francis knelt before them, poured holy water on their feet, wiped them clean and kissed them.

Male and female refugees took part in the ceremony, including Catholics from Nigeria, three Muslims from Mali, Syria and Pakistan, and a Hindu man from India.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-washes-and-kisses-feet-of-muslim-hindu-and-christian-refugees-a6951771.html>

You will note that the language is still all male – pointing to our “brotherhood.” But he washed women’s feet as well – and his message was one of radical inclusiveness. I find hope here.

We need more than one Easter celebration each year – we are in deep need of “Little Easters” throughout the year. These signs of hope are our little Easters – small moments of redemption – occasions of insight and a shift in perspective in the least likely of people – truth spoken by those who are not usually heard in the cacophony of “news noise” and social/political media.

We have a choice about who we are going to believe – the people and places where we are going to look for integrity and positive change – occasions where we might experience a thinness between this world and the spirit world and be shown an unbelievable miracle.

Then it will be our turn to speak the truth – and hope to G-d someone believes us.

Luke 24:1-12

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. **11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.** 12 But **Peter** got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The *Gospel of Mary* is found in the Berlin Gnostic Codex (or Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, as this ancient collection of Gnostic texts is labeled for archival reasons). This very important and well-preserved codex was apparently discovered in the late-nineteenth century somewhere near Akhmim in upper Egypt. It was purchased in 1896 by a German scholar, Dr. Carl Reinhardt, in Cairo and then taken to Berlin.

...But more importantly, the codex preserves the most complete surviving fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* (as the text is named in the manuscript, though it is clear this named Mary is the person we call Mary of Magdala).

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