

“The Mirth of God” I

The Rev. Drew Willard
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John 20:1-18

*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.”

John 20:15^b-16^a

Let us pray... O God,
Engage us with your humor to challenge us in our arrogance,
to rouse us into awareness, to heal us when our hearts are broken,
and reassure us through the beauty of this world.

Amen

At the Sunrise Service, I posed these questions:

What have you been taught about who God is?

What do you think God is like?

Were you taught that God demands perfection

like a parochial school nun with a yardstick,

ready to mete out justice with a lightning strike smack?

Were you taught that God is against anything fun or different

or out of the ordinary?

It would be logical to assume God is like the kings and other powerful figures
that Jesus himself talked about in his parables, like...

locking out unprepared handmaidens

who didn't bring enough fuel for their lamps,

or binding up thoughtless servants who squander their talent,

or toss ne'er-do-wells into outer darkness to weep and gnash their teeth.

Is God like a king on a throne to judge the world

sorting out the good from the evil like sheep from goats?

So, how do you imagine what God is like?

Do you see God as almighty – and merciful, too?

Don't we *expect* God to be almighty?

Don't we prefer God to be more powerful than anything else that is out there?

Aren't we disappointed, though, when God doesn't seem to be around

at the time of tragedies that are personal and historic?

Where was God for the Jewish people during the Holocaust?

Where was God on 9/11? Where was God when *you* needed a miracle?

Well, we also have to ask where was God for Jesus?

When he was on the cross, crying out,

“Eli! Eli! Lama sabachthani?” “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

Let me invite you to consider another way of thinking about God –

that God has a sense of humor – for our sake and despite tragedy.

Willard, p.2

This is not to say that God plays jokes on people,
but that God uses humor to teach and to heal.

Examples for this are all throughout the Gospel stories of Jesus' resurrection
of which the story of Mary Magdalene grieving at the empty tomb
is one of the most important.

When Mary Magdalene discovers that Jesus' body is gone from the tomb,
she races back to tell the disciples, who come out to investigate –
though they find nothing.

Mary returns and stays by the graveside – broken-hearted and crying,
when after awhile, she peers into the empty tomb,
as if she is hoping to find some clue of what happened.

She encounters a vision of angels, who say,
“Young woman, why are you crying?”

If this wasn't shocking enough, Mary is startled by someone speaking behind her,
“Young woman, why are you crying?” and adds, ‘Whom do you seek?’

Well, she has had it, and regains her composure as a strong-minded woman
as Mary Magdalene seems to have been, and she demands to be shown
where Jesus' body is, so that at least she will be able to provide
the care that custom demands!

She thought this person was the groundskeeper, but when he replies,
“Oh Mary!”, she instantly recognizes who this is.

She responds with excitement, saying,
“Rabbouni!” “My dear rabbi!”

Now, the text suggests that Christ soberly warns Mary from touching him
as if somehow this would interfere with the process of
Jesus' condition as a resurrected being:

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended...”

For example, never touch a butterfly immediately after
it has come out of its chrysalis, so as not to damage its wings.

It would seem there might have been some concern like this,
or maybe there was some danger posed to Mary.

Jesus said,

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended...”
but what if he really said it this way,

“Oy! Don't hold me so tight! I still must go up to Heaven!”

I once told this story at my home church implying that Jesus
prevented Mary Magdalene from touching him.

My mother said afterwards,

“Jesus would never tell anyone not to touch him.”

Willard, p.3

At the time I was working at a state psychiatric hospital,
and I did recreational activities with the adult residents there.
One young woman used to wander around the ward,
never really participating in any activity,
but sometimes she would just come up to me
with arms open for a hug.

Well, I was clear about my boundaries, so I would not allow this.
Then this woman with schizophrenia, would make a big smile, and say,
“[Expletive deleted]!” without malice, just for shock effect.

Well, after what my mother said, I reconsidered my attitude,
and following a Bingo game I led on the ward, this woman came up to me
with her arms open wide for a hug.

This time, I gave her a modest hug back,
and she looked at me and smiled a big smile, and said,
“[Expletive deleted]!”

Jesus used humor to engage with people,
to challenge their arrogance with scathing irony,
to wake them up to awareness,
to heal their broken hearts,
and to reassure us all that it is still a beautiful world.

Amen

John 20:1-18 [RSV]

¹Now on the first day of the week

Mary Mag'dalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark,
and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

²So 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.”

³Peter then came out with the other disciple,
and they went toward the tomb.

⁴They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first;

⁵and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there,
but he did not go in.

⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb;
he saw the linen cloths lying,

⁷and the napkin, which had been on his head,
not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.

⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in,
and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not know the scripture,
that he must rise from the dead.

¹⁰Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb,
and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb;

¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain,
one at the head and one at the feet.

¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She said to them,

“Because they have taken away my Lord,
and I do not know where they have laid him.”

¹⁴Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing,
but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵Jesus said to her,

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?”

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.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rab-bo'ni!” (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her,

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father;
but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending
to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

¹⁸Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples,

“I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.