

Anglican Church Arnhem, 20th October 2024. Service of Holy Baptism – Revd Dorienke de Vries

Readings: Isaiah 43.1-3. John 20.11-18

Holy Spirit, be present among us, because if you are present, then nothing else matters. And if you are not present, then nothing else matters either. Amen.

We are on holy ground today. Now don't get me wrong: we are always on holy ground as we live our lives in God's presence. But today we are blessed with the opportunity to visit a garden of resurrection. To witness a special meeting between Jesus and our baptismal candidate; to hear him call her by name. We are on holy ground indeed.

And so this is the right context to reflect on that special meeting in the first garden of the resurrection. The meeting between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It is a very private and intimate scene. Still, it is for a reason that it has been shared with the whole church throughout the ages. Because it is not just a moving story about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It is also about Jesus and you. About Jesus and me.

But first, the story itself. Who was Mary Magdalene? We don't know much about her. She was from Magdala, an important fishing town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. We can assume that she was rich. She is mentioned as one of the women who out of their own means provided for Jesus and his disciples. We do not know how she met Jesus, but we know she was in a bad state when she did. The gospels tell us that Jesus delivered her from seven demons.

Seven demons, no less. That is really bad. Seven in the Bible is the number of fullness and completeness – often a good thing, but when it comes to demons, it is the worst. The demons had completely taken over her life and her personality. Because that is what demons do. Some of the symptoms described in the gospel stories seem to suggest an epileptic fit, or a psychotic episode. In a time when the medical profession was less advanced than it is nowadays, people would blame demons for distressing symptoms and behaviour. We also hear about demons frustrating human communication by making people deaf and unable to speak.

Today we no longer use that kind of language. Even so, we too say things like: We have to face our demons. This often means that we have to deal with the dark aspects of our personalities. Or with the bad things that have happened to us, and are still haunting us. But there is one thing that the demons in the gospel and our modern day demons have in common: they deeply damage our personalities and our sense of identity. They make us unable to live life to the full. They can destroy our ability or even our desire to communicate. However they do it, they isolate us from others and alienate us from our deepest selves.

And Mary had to deal with seven of these nasty beings. Whatever her condition looked like, it had taken over her life. She must have been completely stuck; without a sense of purpose; out of touch with her deepest self; out of touch with others and out of touch with God. She may have shown distressing symptoms, but it is also possible that on the outside she led a perfectly normal and successful life, while on the inside everything was darkness and despair.

If we look at it like this, I think we can all in some way or other relate to Mary's situation before she met Jesus. We all have moments or even times in our lives when we feel stuck; when it seems impossible that we will ever be whole and happy again; when things that have happened to us, or have been said to us have damaged us deeply; when trauma or depression or just the darkness of feeling lost and lonely has taken over our lives; when we feel out of control and dead inside.

For Mary Magdalene this all changed when she met Jesus. Again, we do not know the story of her healing. But we know that she never left him after that. He had called her out of darkness into a world of wonderful light. In his presence she felt sane and whole. In supporting the community of the disciples, and the ministry of Jesus, she found a new purpose in life.

I hope we now have a better understanding of her despair after Jesus had died. Not only had she lost someone whom she loved deeply. But she had invested everything she had and everything she was in his ministry, the proclamation of God's kingdom. And this ministry now seemed to have come to nothing. Her faith seemed to have been in vain. She had no hope left. There was no future without him, not for her, not for God's people, not for the world. There was nothing to expect any more, only the darkness and despair she had known all too well. The community of disciples would fall apart, and then what would happen to her? Would her demons return, stronger and more deadly than before, now she had tasted how different life could be? How betrayed she must have felt, how utterly let down.

This, too, is something that may sound familiar. In our newsletter our candidate shared with us how she left her former faith community and decided that she never ever wanted to set foot in a church again. That says a lot. When we have given everything of ourselves to something or someone we really believed in, and at the end are left with nothing – it is one of the worst kinds of despair. Will we ever be able to hope again? To trust again? To be joyful again? To feel like our true selves again? Like Mary Magdalene, we may not be able to see how, and we just stand there, weeping at the grave where our hopes and joys lie buried.

There was only one thing able to break through Mary's despair, but that one thing was completely impossible: the voice of the living Jesus. So when she hears somebody asking her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' it just doesn't register. How was she to know that he would, literally, even come back

from the death to rescue her? Jesus has to speak her name before the penny drops. Mary. Names in the Bible always refer to our deepest selves. They tell us who we are before God and before our fellow human beings. So when Jesus speaks Mary's name, it is so much more than saying: 'Hey, Mary, it's me!' By speaking Mary's name Jesus restores her true identity. Like before, he gives her back to herself. Through this one word that he speaks: Mary!' she comes into being again, she is recreated, a new creation.

N – you never wanted to set foot in a church again. And here you are today. There was this still, small voice. There was this pinprick of light. And you trusted and followed, and found there was a way, after all. You went through fire and water, and you came out at the other end. Morning has broken, and you are invited to walk in the early sunlight with the risen Christ, in your own garden of resurrection.

And here we are with you. Only because Jesus called us by name, too, and delivered us from whatever it was that kept us in darkness. And he continues to call us, because our journeys continue. He knows us all by name, and we are all invited, day by day, to discover his voice in the midst of this noisy life, and his light in the darkness of this world and of our souls.

We are on holy ground today. We have seen Mary Magdalene being restored to new life. We will hear Jesus calling one of us by name, and we will hear her Yes to that call. May it not end there. May we all hear Jesus calling our name today, and run to meet him in the garden of our own resurrection. Amen.