

“Which comes first on Easter, the belief or the belonging?”
Easter C (April 21, 2019)
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

Theologian Peter Rollins once told a parable about a world-renowned philosopher who, from an early age, set himself the task of proving once and for all that God doesn’t exist.¹ “Of course,” writes Rollins, “such a task was immense, for the various arguments for and against the existence of God had done battle over the ages without either being able to claim [complete] victory. [The philosopher] was, however, a genius without equal, and he possessed a singular vision that drove him to work each day and long into every night in order to understand the intricacies of every debate, every discussion, and every significant work on the subject. The philosopher’s project began to earn him respect among his fellow professors when, as a young man, he published the first volume of what would turn out to be a finely honed, painstakingly researched, encyclopedic masterpiece on the subject of God. The first volume of this work argued persuasively that the various ideas of God that had been expressed throughout antiquity were philosophically incoherent and logically flawed. As each new volume appeared, he offered, time and again, devastating critiques of the theological ideas that had been [held] through different periods of history. In his early forties, he completed the last volume, which brought him to the present day.

“However,” Rollins continues, “the completion of this work did not satisfy him. He still had not found a convincing argument that would demonstrate once and for all the nonexistence of God. For all he had shown was that all the notions of God up to that time had been problematic. So he spent another sixteen years researching arguments and interrogating them with a highly nuanced, logical analysis. But by now he was in his late fifties and had slowly begun to despair of ever completing his life project. Then, late one evening while he was locked away in his study, bent wearily over his old oak desk, surrounded by a vast sea of books, he felt a deep stillness descend upon the room. As he sat there motionless, everything around him seemed to radiate an inexpressible light and warmth. Then, deep in his heart he heard the voice of God address him: ‘Dear friend,’” said God, “‘the task you have set yourself is a futile one. I have watched all these years as you poured your being into this endless task. Yet, you fail to understand that your project can be brought to completion only with my help. Your dedication and single-mindedness have not gone unnoticed, and they have won my respect,’” said God. “‘As a result, I will tell you a sacred secret . . . , Dear friend, *I do not exist.*’ Then, all of a sudden, everything appeared as it was before, and the philosopher was left sitting at his desk with a deep smile breaking across his face. He put his pen away and left his study, never to return. Instead, in gratitude to God for helping him complete his lifelong project [of proving God’s nonexistence], he dedicated his remaining years to serving the poor.”

This story is told by Peter Rollins with tongue-in-cheek and with a biting sense of situational irony. What we expect when listening to this story is that God’s speaking will prove once-and-for-all that God exists. Instead, God says to the philosopher, “I do not exist.” But, of course, it’s *God* who’s saying this. But below the surface irony, there’s a deeper meaning

¹ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2015 [2009]), 104-106.

to this story. Here's how Peter Rollins puts it: "just as ... belief in God is always a belief in a certain concept of God," he says, "so the rejection of God is ... the rejection of one or more concepts of God." As one could ask the believer "What God do you believe in?", writes Rollins, so one could ask the nonbeliever "What God do you *not* believe in?" God, says Rollins, is not an object "out there" that we can "dispassionately reflect upon" and believe in or not. Instead, he says, God is like "light." "Just as the light in the room cannot be seen but rather allows us to see, so God is not directly experienced but rather is the name we give to a whole new way of experiencing."

I wanted to begin this Easter sermon by troubling the notion of "belief" because the Easter stories in the New Testament gospels trouble the notion of belief. *Believing* in resurrection is not the first reaction of any of those first witnesses to the empty tomb. The first witnesses are instead confused and perplexed, disoriented, unsettled, disturbed. And slowly over time, Easter becomes for those first Christians "a whole new way of experiencing" the world, to borrow again from Peter Rollins.

Today we heard John's version of the Easter story, which is different from the versions we find in the other New Testament gospels - the Easter stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark's version of Easter is the shortest - just eight verses. In that story, *three* women approach the tomb and discover it open. And when they peer inside, they see an angel who tells them that Jesus has been raised. Mark's Easter story ends abruptly with the women saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid. Matthew's version of Easter speaks of *two* women *not* three approaching the tomb. And as they draw near, according to Matthew, an angel descends from heaven to roll the stone in front of the tomb away as the ground quakes. The women flee and meet Jesus, and then tell the other disciples what they saw. Luke's version of Easter doesn't specify how many women peered into the tomb; but Luke says there were *two* angels *not one* who announced the resurrection to the women. And when the women told the disciples, says Luke, Peter ran to see the empty tomb for himself. John's version of Easter - today's gospel reading - says only one woman approached the tomb: Mary Magdalene. And John doesn't speak of an angel or of two angels being present when Mary first peers inside. It's just Mary who sees the empty tomb, and then races to tell the other disciples. Then, says John, Peter and another disciple - some say the "other disciple" was the very author of John's gospel - run to see for themselves. Both disciples then went home perplexed, says John, while Mary Magdalene, who ran with them, stayed behind, by the tomb, weeping. When she looked inside again, she saw two angels sitting there keeping vigil.

These Easter stories disagree on details and on the order of events - the number of women, the number of angels, how many disciples actually looked inside the tomb - but they all agree that the tomb was empty, that women were the first witnesses on Easter morning, and that *belief* was not the first reaction of anyone - with the exception of one disciple who is said to have simply "believed" that the tomb was empty. Instead of belief, everyone who peered inside the tomb, according to the stories, was confused and afraid and disoriented, unsettled, disturbed, overwhelmed.

But what has always perplexed me as I read John's Easter story is why this version focuses so intently on Mary Magdalene. Only John tells of a special meeting between Jesus and Mary in a garden near the tomb where Mary mistakes the resurrected Christ for the gardener. Only

John preserves an intimate conversation between Jesus and Mary, where Mary, upon recognizing that it is Jesus, grabs hold of him and embraces him. And only in John is Mary Magdalene the first and only witness to have seen the resurrected Jesus. She is, according to John, the first Christian missionary, announcing the good news to everyone else. But, why Mary? Let me get wonky for a second. Christian history and even some recent films have speculated that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute before becoming a follower of Jesus. The evidence for this is thin and circumstantial, but is based on two stories in the gospels about women anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them clean with their hair. Earlier in John's gospel, Mary poured costly ointment all over Jesus' feet, and then dried them with her hair. Luke's gospel preserves a different version of this story. In Luke, Jesus is at a dinner party when, says Luke, an unnamed "woman of the city" - a euphemism for "prostitute" - entered the dining room, knelt down in front of Jesus, and washed his feet with her tears and her hair. Onlookers in both stories were appalled that Jesus would permit this, but in both stories Jesus defends the women; and to the weeping prostitute he says, "you are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." The film *Passion of the Christ*, takes this connection between Mary Magdalene and the "woman of the city" a step further, and portrays Mary as the woman caught in adultery from John's gospel - the woman who, says John, was thrown down into the dust before Jesus by her accusers, who intended to stone her to death. But Jesus stands between the accusers and Mary in the film, defending her and calling them out as hypocrites for condemning her when they themselves were sinners too. John's gospel preserves Jesus' timeless words: "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." Hearing this, the humbled men dropped their stones one by one and drifted away.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Mary Magdalene had indeed been a "woman of the city," and that she was indeed, as the film *Passion of the Christ* says, the woman whom Jesus defended before her accusers. Maybe it was her checkered past - her cross past, her crucifixion past, the skeletons in her closet - that caused her to linger by the empty tomb. Maybe she lingered because Jesus had treated her differently than the other men in her life: he treated her as a precious human being and not as an object to be exploited. Maybe she lingered because Jesus had told her she was accepted and beloved and forgiven and not defined by the crosses of her past - that she was God's child regardless of what she'd done; that she mattered; that she belonged. Maybe John's version of Easter puts Mary front-and-center to hammer home the point that Easter is to be experienced - that Easter *was* experienced in the life of Mary Magdalene: a broken person - broken like all of us - a broken person, whose past skeletons were brushed aside by Jesus, who accepted her and blessed her and embraced her as God's child in spite of her past. Maybe Mary lingers in John's story as a statement to all of us with checkered pasts and skeletons in our closets - we who may have done things or said things or tried things that we now wish we could undo or unsay or untry - maybe Mary lingers as a statement, as a witness, as a testimony that, yes, Easter is for everyone with a cross or with crosses in their past. And maybe she lingers as a testimony that Christ's life and death and resurrection is God's way of saying that *everyone* matters, *everyone* is accepted, *everyone* belongs long before they can say the words, "I believe."

In her book *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans tells of a conference she put together in 2015 to answer one question: "Why Christian?"² "Why," she asks, "with all the atrocities past and present committed in God's name, amid all the divisions ripping apart the church, in spite of

² Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 162-164.

all [the] doubts and frustrations and fears about faith, are [people] still followers of Jesus?” “We were a diverse group [at the conference],” she writes, “evangelical and Lutheran, Baptist and Episcopalian, Latina and black and white and Indian and Korean, high church and low church, Catholic and Protestant, Reformed and Methodist, straight and gay and bisexual and transgender, pastors and scholars, writers and activists, crunchy dreadlocked mamas, tattooed and foul-mouthed priests, sweet-talking southerners, and stiletto-boasting fashionistas. Looking at us from the outside, you’d have no idea what we all had in common. While there were variations in the verses, our shared refrain remained unapologetically orthodox, undeniably Christian. We spoke of sin, repentance, baptism, confession, incarnation, resurrection, and Scripture. ...”

“[E]ach speaker approached the microphone to share their stories” and answer the “Why Christian?” question. “‘I am a Christian,’ explained Episcopal priest Kerlin Richter, ‘because having a body wasn’t always good news for me, but then I met Good News that had a body. In Jesus, I met a God who spits and kisses, who yells and cries. I am a messy and embodied person, and this is a messy and embodied faith.’ ‘I am a Christian,’ declared Austin Channing Brown, an author and activist whose work focuses on racial justice in the church, ‘because God knows my pain, not in an abstract way, but in a real, bloody, enfleshed way.’ ‘I am a Christian,’ said Rachel Murr, a researcher and counselor, ‘because the gospel is good news for [queer] people [like me] too.’ ‘I am a Christian,’ explained Baptist preacher and human rights activist Allyson Robinson, ‘because I don’t always know if this story is true, but I choose to live my life as if it were. I choose to live as if the things Jesus died for were worthy of God’s sacrifice and therefore worthy of mine.’” “When it came time for me to share,” writes Rachel Held-Evans, “I spoke honestly about my doubts about the Bible and Christianity. I confessed my uncertainties about raising children in this broken and beloved community we call the church. I explained how gatherings like these help restore my faith because they pull me out of my head and into the lives of others, into the big, colorful, messy, and magical story of Jesus. ‘I am a Christian,’ I concluded, ‘because the story of Jesus is still the story I’m willing to risk being wrong about.’”

....Maybe we all linger by the empty tomb on Easter - linger like Mary Magdalene did so long ago - because the Easter story *not only* offers a whole new way of seeing the world - to modify those words of Peter Rollins; but Easter offers a whole new way of seeing ourselves - seeing ourselves as beloved and as belonging to God and to the church long before we can say the words, “I believe.” Amen.