

A Teaching, Trusting, Towering Faith

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Texts: John 20: 1-18

One of my all-time favorite teachers was, and is, the late, great Rev. Peter Gomes. He preached and taught at Harvard for many years. He would often share with his students something I now pass along whenever I can: that good preaching is a conversation that involves three levels of trust. First, trust yourself, that you and the Spirit through you, have something to say! Second, trust your listeners, that they will be able to hear and take away something meaningful, intended or not! Finally, trust the text! Trust that a given scripture, no matter how strange, irrelevant, or antiquated it may seem, always offers some deep and lasting truth waiting to be revealed. Wise words from a wise man. I try my best to put them to use regularly. But my snarkier self sometimes wishes I had the chance to ask the good Reverend: does all this apply on Easter, too? Seriously, take today, for example. For one thing, following Gomes's guidance means I need to trust you all, here in Cambridge, not exactly a hotbed of receptivity to religious ideas, and, on Easter, I usually only know maybe half of you at most. I don't know. You tell me...*Can I trust you?* [Guess we know our answer to that one:). As if that's not enough, we've got this Easter morning text. Trust this technically impossible, quintessentially unbelievable story that Christ is risen!? Really, Gomes? This is a tall order today! Yet I can hear him saying: Yes, really! It applies especially on Easter! He then might offer something like this line from his bestseller "The Good Book; Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart." where he says: "We trust the text not because it is "true" in the sense of fact, but because...it points to the truth and communicates the truth because it comes from the truth which is God." With that, I invite you to help me out with this one. Let's try to trust the text together, and with it two very powerful teachers we meet in it who point us to that truth which is God.

Ready? Our first teacher is Mary Magdalene – Easter starts with trusting women! The gospel requires us to believe women, to trust their experience, and to hear them out. For without their testimony, we might not be here today! Christ didn't pass along the testimony that he is risen! Women did! In each of the four gospels, the women are the first to the tomb, and they are usually named: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James or Salome, and Johanna! Here, in John's gospel, it's Mary Magdalene who has come alone, and has the beautiful moment with Jesus, then goes and tells the others, the disciples, as he tells her to. For centuries, our tradition has left this Mary, Mary Magdalene, at the margins of Jesus' inner circle of 12 males. Good thing we don't always have to trust the tradition! Thanks/no-thanks to interpreters, preachers, even Hollywood producers, and how she appears at other points in the gospels, Mary is too often reduced to a stereotypical temptress, a prostitute, a sinner extraordinaire. As one scholar put it, she is almost always depicted as that woman of "loose hair, loose morals, and exposed cleavage."

But check this out! According to recent feminist and other scholarship, there's evidence to suggest that Mary Magdalene, aka Mary of Magdala, may not be from Magdala, or Migdal, after all. Apparently, Magdala, the ancient Christian pilgrimage site revered as her home on the coast of the Sea of Galilee, was called something else entirely during the time of Jesus, which begs the question: why Magdalene? Scholars increasingly argue that the expression "Magdalene" isn't about her origin! It's more likely "an honorific from the Hebrew and Aramaic roots for "tower" or "magnified." Just as the Apostle Peter is

given the epithet "rock," ("You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church"), Mary, could well have acquired a title, too: "Magdalene," meaning "the tower of faith," or "Mary the magnified." Go figure that this potentially world-transforming understanding was largely silenced and suppressed. And yet it surfaces from time to time in the early centuries, including in the writings of the 4th century Saint Jerome, best known for translating the Bible into Latin. He said in a letter from the year 412, that he believed Mary got the name Magdalene because she was a tower of faith — a "*tower-ess*" as he puts it. Talk about a deeper truth being revealed! If only the early church had the *chutzpah* to trust it and trust her instead of obscuring and blotting out her towering legacy!

Moreover, our Easter story begins by centering her lived experience, her courage and vulnerability. She audaciously comes to the tomb just two days after witnessing the torturous crucifixion of her beloved Jesus, and the gospel trusts her enough to let her speak for herself about the trauma, grief, and confusion she is withholding. It invites her not once but twice, with a question that cuts to the hearts and resounds through the ages: "Woman, why are you weeping?" If weeping seems a little dissonant for you on Easter, I'm sorry, but guess what? There's no empty tomb without a death first! There's no empty cross without the systemic violence of the crucifixion. And to trust the resurrection has something to teach us begins with trusting the lived reality of these things, in her story and in our own lives. So, let's stay here, for a moment on this bright, brisk morning, and join Mary in her profound confusion, loss, fear, that deep separation anxiety she is holding in her body. Her world as she's known it, all she's trusted to date, is receding before her eyes! Surely, we can locate this in our lives, if not in the anxiety we feel about daily disassembling democracies or our already catastrophic climate crisis! And yet our collective denial and distractions rage on! Maybe a better question for some of us is "Why aren't you weeping?"

Let's turn now to our second teacher, Jesus, who through his life carried and taught God's truth and love in his very being. He says her name, "Mary," and immediately, she knows this is no gardener. She recognizes him! She says it herself, "Rabouni!" "Teacher!" *Teacher!* She's there looking for the truth! She's out of her depth and knows she needs to learn something new. And she sees it and so much more in his risen figure. And then he tells her - teaches her - what she and we most need to hear. "Don't hold on to me!" I hear this as: "Don't hold on to what I *have* meant to you. Don't hold on to the fear that came from losing me to death. Don't hold on to what you think will make you feel better right now! It is a brand new day, and we've crossed the threshold into a new reality. And now it's time to let go and trust that God's risen truth and love will carry you from here, in partnership, always. What's more, this lasting truth and love - the peace, justice, and joy it brings - is now yours to share." Talk about a tall order! Yet Mary is the first to trust and preach the truth of this new reality! She goes and tells the disciples the first sermon: "I have seen the Lord!" Our Easter story asks us to trust her *and* that he's with us still, encouraging us to share God's death-defying truth and radically non-violent love with the world!

Ok. Time to shift to a story! Since the first Sunday of Lent, we've been hosting an exhibit of 11 portraits by the artist Robert Shetterly. They are part of his prolific Americans Who Tell the Truth series. We need to send about half of them back this week, so please come through after church if you haven't already. They are stunning! The opening in late February featured an unveiling of a new portrait of the writer, abolitionist Harriet Jacobs. Born into slavery, after escaping and authoring her fierce autobiography of resistance and reliance, Jacobs eventually retired and ran a boarding house just around the corner, over at 17 Story Street. One of you described it as the single most powerful experience you've ever had at First Church during your over 30 years of membership here. Here's some of what happened. Before the unveiling itself, as I was introducing our speakers, the still-draped portrait of Ms. Jacobs somehow toppled off its easel and crashed to the floor! No one had touched or knocked it. The

artist, who was with us, immediately went to it, assured us the portrait was undamaged, and restored to it to an upright position, still veiled in cloth. Our first speaker for the day, an associate dean at Harvard Divinity School and Harriet Jacobs scholar, Melissa Bartholomew, who I introduced as a truth-teller in her own right, then stood up to offer some background about Jacobs. She began her remarks, saying: 'Friends, Harriet has already made her presence known here today.' There was an audible chuckle in that room, too. And then she said, "No. I'm serious. She is here. She is with us now." From that moment on, you could hear from a pin drop a mile away! People were riveted, I mean they were utterly submerged in the depth of what was she telling us! She spoke powerfully and personally and spiritually about her belief in the power of Harriet's truth-telling and her ongoing legacy. Then she brought it back to us with this line: "Harriet is calling us to attention! She's calling us to action." She's calling us to carry it on! One could tell by the awed silence and deep listening in that room that we believed her. She left us with a lasting curiosity, a hunger even to learn more, about how Harriet and the Spirit are leading us from well beyond her grave at Mt Auburn cemetery.

Today, on Easter, we are invited into that same spirit of trust, awe, and spiritual and moral imagination! So, trust and imagine it with me:

Christ has already made his presence known!

Christ is here, now.

He is with us, and with him, God's truth is here, rising all around!

Together, they are somehow calling us by name and calling us to attention. Trust and conjure, too, the towering faith of that great teacher, Mary the Magnified! Turn to them, and whoever are genuine teachers and truth-tellers in your life, be they elders, ancestors, modern-day prophets, or the children, who Jesus said would lead us! Let go of whatever you are holding too tightly, your blame or shame, your illusions of control and security, your privilege. Let go, trust the risen one and the lasting truth and love he proclaims, and I promise; I promise you too will find a lightness, peace, hope, and joy arising in you like the resurrection itself!

In the end, I trust ya! More importantly, I believe God trusts you. She trusts us all. She is trusting us now to draw the lines between the importance of believing women then and the mantra of "Believe Women" now. Indeed, believe and empower them to lead and be towers of faith and courage! God is trusting us to do as Jesus did, and to Say Her Name, Say His Name, Say Their Name, for all those who rest in peace and power and who have been silenced and stuck down by systemic, scapegoating violence! God is trusting us to let go and let God's everlasting truth and love and joy break through the despairing lies and desperate violence of our world, as the dawn breaks forth into a new day! And, on a decidedly lighter and more musical note, I believe God is trusting us all, no matter our singing skills, to belt out our Easter hymns and even the Hallelujah Chorus. Go ahead and be bold and fearless in our imperfection, and let the joy rise up!

For God's truth is here, rising in and all around us. It's already setting us free!

For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!