

SHOCKING BUT TRUE STORIES

The Reverend Peter F. Walsh
April 4, 2010 Easter Sunday

A Mysterious Shocking Story

I am going to tell you a shocking story. It is a true story, though I do not understand it. For me personally, it is the most moving, most mysterious, and most important faith story I have heard in ten years. Some of you will believe it and some of you will not. Just remember, even if you do not believe it; it does not mean that it is not true. For each of us there are many things that are true that we do not believe or understand. Bishop Grein pointed out last week that religious mysteries are mysteries not because they are not true, but because we cannot fully understand, control, or own them.

A Contemporary Resurrection Story

Easter is the season for Resurrection stories and I am going to tell you a contemporary resurrection story. I am going to tell you a story about someone who encounters Jesus regularly, sometimes in bodily form. Remember the end of Matthew's Gospel, "I am with you always, even unto the end of time". This is a very palpable reality for her.

Always Shocking but...

I want to remind you that the Resurrection has always been shocking. Look at Mary Magdalene in today's Gospel. She is shocked to come upon Jesus. She just reports the basic Easter fact: Christ is alive. She does not

understand it. She does not write a treatise. But Jesus' presence changes her life.

The other disciples who Jesus appears to do not understand it either. They are so shocked that they do not dare talk, except of course Peter who often verbally treads where angels would not dare. The Resurrection is so shocking that for many modern minds it seems unbelievable, a story made up to make a point. Then again, most of the apostles died because they would not be quiet about experiencing Christ as alive after he had died. Then there are those who believe in the Resurrection but familiarity with it makes it kind of a ho-hum.

You know, "Yes, Jesus was raised from the dead 2,000 years ago but it does not have much to do with my daily life. He is up there in the heavens somewhere, and I am down here slugging it out, feeling good, feeling bad another day, another dirty shirt. I am here to tell you the Resurrection is no ho-hum and it is still shocking today.

The Story of Mary

The shocking story I am about to tell you is about a woman named Mary. Fitting given all the Marys that Jesus has appeared to. In the Gospel story this morning Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, which means Mary from Magdala, an ancient town on the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps we should call our Mary,

Mary 'Illinoisian', or Mary 'former Chicagoian', given this is where she grew up. Or given where she lives now we could call her Mary 'half-way-to-Milwaukeeian'. Mary and I are email friends. I am making plans to go see her. She is a friend of a friend. She gave me permission to use her story

As preparation for the story, I want you to know Mary was not mentally ill. Not delusional. Not on any medications. Clean bill of mental health from psychologists. As spiritual directors she has had: the former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Frank Griswold and a contemplative monk in England. She says she is the most ordinary of people except perhaps more open than others.

Background

Mary was born in 1940. During her childhood: she always wanted an unshakeable faith. She married a man who became an Episcopal priest. They had three children (two girls and a boy). During her twenties, she considered herself a failure at the art of being a priest's wife, – she was kicked out of the Altar Guild. For many years she wanted to know Jesus, not just about him

Encounters in 1978

During this time, Mary encountered difficult and painful encounters with parishioners. As a result, she experienced an urgent and compelling need to know Jesus now in the depths of her soul. She wanted to make a deal with Jesus: and begged the Lord to take her problems and to give her peace. In return, she would give him her whole life. Jesus responded. From then on Mary began to encounter Jesus as a person who she could see and touch and hear. Her life was forever changed

November 1980: Tragedy & Calling

During parents' weekend for their daughter, Mary's seventeen-year-old son Tim committed suicide in the garage. Mary suffered terrific grief – where was Jesus? She could not hear him anymore.

Encounter Two Months after Son's Death

The hardest time for Mary was from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. when she was coming home from work. Tim was not there to greet her. No "Hi, Mom" as he came in the door. She begged the Lord to help her, "Lord, if you will just help me through that time of the day, I know I will make it. I will do anything you ask, just help me."

The Lord spoke audibly to her in that moment. She wrote the words in her Bible because it was the only piece of paper she could find.

Her Calling

Jesus asked her to trust him and to give him her life. She said yes. Send her out to the corners of his kingdom. Give her words to say at the right time. Show her who the words were to be delivered to. Jesus told her there was a plan for all; in time her purpose would be revealed. He said her own suffering and her son Tim would show her what to do, where to go, and what her purpose in life was to be. In this encounter she finally and completely gave her life to Christ

First Message to be Delivered

Driving home from work, Jesus gave Mary a message for her son's best friend. She pulled off the road, and wrote the words on some scrap paper. When Mary arrived home, she decided not to deliver the message because people would think she is crazy. She prayed,

“I will do anything, Lord, but not this” Then the doorbell rang. The young man was standing there and asked her for the words he knew Jesus had given her. The message was: Tim was with Jesus and at peace

Commuting with Christ

Jesus was often there as Mary commuted home. She worked in downtown Chicago. Jesus often met her on the train. He would sit next to her, often aware that she had to move over. She once asked him how others saw him. They see an elderly homeless man, Jesus replied. Jesus would sometimes be in her car as she drove in the driveway

Since Retirement

Mary now lives in rural Illinois, halfway to Milwaukee. Jesus visits her at home. She has personal information about Jesus. He likes rocking chairs. Has big hands. Has a gut-wrenching laugh. Enjoys family life. Is very practical and down-to-earth. When Mary's grandson is sick, Jesus advises that he get another Seven Up He will wait in the rocker for her to get back.

Nearly 30 Years Ministry as a Word Bearer for Jesus

Mary calls herself a “word bearer”. Gradually praying for people who have asked for words from Jesus became full-time work. Mary has done this for thousands of people. The words and messages have continued for nearly 30 years. She does not understand it, but knows it's true. Mary no longer thinks it unusual to hear and see Jesus. He is real. Jesus hears and answers all prayers, and we hear him in different ways

Questions: How Does it Happen?

On Hearing Jesus

Mary not always sees Jesus, but she hears his voice clearly. She hears a voice that is outside of herself. It is not something she hears only in her head and in her heart. Most often she hears him when she is praying, but Jesus does interrupt her at meetings, while driving, and during sermons. Sometimes she hears him in groups, but those around her do not hear him. Family and friends can sometimes tell when the Lord is speaking because she tunes out.

On Seeing Jesus

Mary sees Jesus as a real person; not a hazy, ghost-like figure. When he sits down next to her, sometimes at church during a service, she feels compelled to move over and make room for him. She is aware that others around her do not see him when he appears to her, or at least do not see him in the same way she sees him.

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How Does She Receive the Messages:

Jesus may say to her, “There are words for Susan.” Other times Jesus might say, “Bill asked for words and direction from me and here they are” She feels like she is taking divine dictation. Jesus does not pause or repeat words so it is difficult to get every single word perfectly. Messages always include Scripture that Jesus gives for the person. The Lord has actually had her look up each passage in her Bible before making a note of it for the person for whom it is intended. Mary never remembers the messages she receives. The important thing is the messages between the Lord and the receiver. She receives messages daily. Some days as many as 30. Other days may focus intense prayer on one person. Some messages are a few sentences; others are pages long.

Some prayers are answered in a few days; others take months. The Lord's timing is a mystery to her.

How Can She Be Sure the Messages are from Jesus?

Mary worries that she is getting in the way of listening. It the hardest aspect of this gift.

Theologians say any prophetic gift of words cannot be 100 per cent accurate. Mary agrees. She knows she gets words wrong, but she believes the Lord will still make it right. She knows truth without a doubt. She hears and sees him as clearly as the people around her. She has put herself under the authority and testing of the Church since the very beginning, and seeks guidance to protect people, herself, and the Church from error. Mary believes God protects the Church. If she misuses the gift he would take it from her.

From Mary

I received an email from Mary yesterday that said "Dear Peter,

I am glad that you can share my story and my son's suicide....and how we moved through that [the] worst of times to a place of grace and courage, of trust and hope. When I turned to Jesus, I knew he was the only way I could get through it, and I begged him to help me and guide me forward through this worst of times...having your child choose to end his own life. And, in return, I promised to do anything...anything he wanted me to do in his name...just take away this pain. He did, inch by inch. He told me to share his love, words and reality with the world....to witness and share Tim's story. It seemed pretty simple. It was very hard in the beginning and I was very much afraid. And because my husband was a priest, what could people possibly think of me! Those were the things I struggled with at first. It will be 30 years in November. Hard for me to believe that it's been that long, and all that has unfolded in that time. He did bring

me healing and it continues to be an amazing journey..."

A Message from Jesus

The note went on to say many things. But the underlying message was this -- Jesus wants us to be closer to him so we will all know he is real. Not just a story in a book, but real.

Stories about Jesus

This story about Mary' and all the other Mary's in the New Testaments are not really stories about women named Mary. They are really stories about Jesus. All have the same point: the Easter fact: Christ is alive. He is real here and now. When you come in touch with him or he comes in touch with you, it changes everything

Amen.