



at the tomb

scripture reading: John 20:1-18

Robert Steiner

a grieving saint

Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the grave, early Sunday morning, when it is still dark. She wants to be close, physically close to the body of the one that returned her to the living. She did not leave his side since her liberation and stayed with him even under the cross. She was there when they took his body down from the cross, anointed and secretly buried him. Roman law would not allow a criminal to be buried. But her love for Jesus knew no fear. Hers was not a journey of fear, but one of sorrow, one of arriving and taking time to mourn. Indeed, blessed are those who allow themselves to mourn and resist those who want us to just “get on with it”. But true comfort does not lie in glossing over or forgetting the pain of loss.

To mourn is to resist those who tried to silence Jesus. To mourn is to keep his memory alive and to honor his contribution. To mourn is to stay with the painful questions and to not experience the lack of answers as a defeat, but as a sign of solidarity with all the innocent victims of human history. It is important to not forget, to remember, to remember in the sense of reassembling and preserving one's individual recollections, of inspiring a collective remembering. True comfort and hope does not lie in amnesia but in a mourning that is committed to remember. The result is the experience of absence giving way to a new presence. It takes 50 days for Pentecost to arrive.

Blessed are the sorrowful, for they will be comforted. - Jesus

Sorrow is better than fear. Fear is a journey; a terrible journey. But sorrow is at least an arriving. - Alan Paton

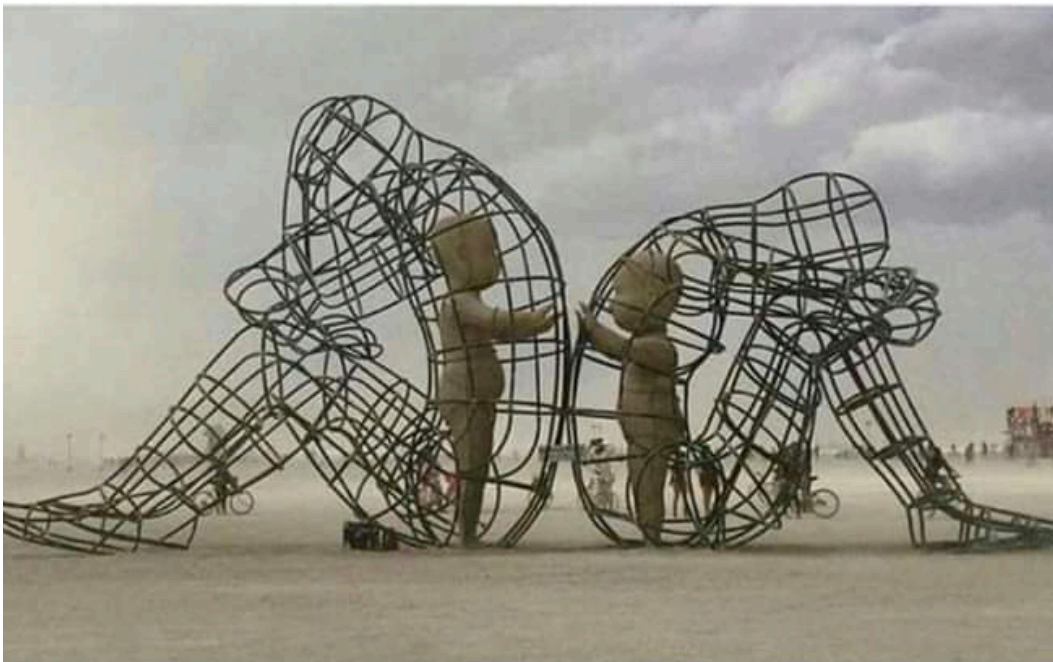
Whenever Rabbi Baal Schem Tov saw that the ties between heaven and earth were cut through and it seemed impossible to reconnect them through prayer, he used to renew them by telling a story. - from Martin Buber's Collection of Hassidic Wisdom (my own translation)



a repeated turning

As Mary Magdalene makes her way to the tomb she is determined to not let go of the past. She will not join those travelling to Emmaus. She will not return to the Sea of Galilee. And she will not continue to hide in the Upper Room. And not even the shock of the stone being rolled away and the body having disappeared will stop her from clinging to the past. Having shared the terrible news with Peter and John, she turns around again, returning to the grave. Will the darkness take shape, if she dares to look into it long enough? Again she turns noticing a gardener standing behind her. He does not seem to be able to help her. Again she turns to the darkness of the tomb. Only when she hears him call her by name does she make the last and final turning of her life. There is so much in the

name our parents have given us. There is so much in the name with which people address us. And there are so many ways of saying our name. It can frighten us and make us hide. It can make us come out of our hiding places. There are times when it is easier to accept death than to embrace life, when it is easier to live in the past than to live into an uncertain future. The final turning marks a decisive shift on her journey of grief: She now no longer looks for Jesus among the dead, but searches for him among the living. Blessed are those artists that refrain from painting the living Christ. We are called to no longer cling to his physical body and appearance. He comes to us as a stranger. He wants to be found among the living. Faith is not about having to believe in the resurrection as a dogmatic statement, but about trusting that at any moment, in any encounter, the risen Christ might reveal himself to us - as he did on the road to Emmaus and at the Sea of Galilee. To Mary he was the gardener, planting new seeds of hope.



The burning man statue.

The child within us
is always seeking
connection,
acceptance, and
love.

the gift of stories

Twice Mary is asked: Why are you crying? This is not a cynical question with the angels implying that she should know better. It is an invitation to grieve and to tell her story. The gardener also asks her the same question and concretizes it: Who are you looking for? Another invitation to tell her story. And what a story of both joy and pain does she have to tell! Rabbi Baal Shem Tov was convinced that there are moments when stories are even more powerful than prayers to renew the connection between heaven and earth. One cannot underestimate their capacity to heal what is broken or wounded. In her reflections on "Hoffnung und Erinnerung. Die heilsame Kraft des Erzählens" (NDR Kultur) Doris Weber shares a story told by Mechthilde Kütemeyer, a head physician at a hospital in Germany. A young man had been hospitalised with serious blood poisoning. Despite concerted efforts from the medical team, they could not control the fever and the infection. In the evening he was put into a quiet room, set aside for terminally ill patients. The same evening one of the doctors passed his room and instead of going home decided to sit at his bed side for a while. She had heard about the young man's story, how he fled from former East Germany to the West, leaving behind his family, who had no idea how ill he had become. The doctor couldn't bear the thought that he should die all by himself. Being a mother herself she would hope that another person would do the same would one of her children be dying in a place far away from home. As she sat at his side she noticed that he could hardly breathe. But then he turned to her

and she heard him softly ask: "Sing some songs, tell me fairytales." And so she sat at his side throughout the night singing children's songs and lullabies, telling bits and pieces of fairytales. After all those stories were also about experiences of suffering and oppression. The German song "Hänschen Klein", which is about a small boy traveling into the world all by himself, was also his story. In the morning the fever had left him and he continued to live.

Where there is a human being,



there is a story. And where there is a story, there is a human being. Stories do not only renew the ties between heaven and earth, but also between human beings. The other, the stranger, the opponent, the traitor, the perpetrator receive a human countenance. We are encouraged to re-examine our prejudice and stereotypes, to enter in a safe space where empathy and compassion can grow.

Where there are two adults fighting with each other, there are always

two children within them reaching out towards each other. Stories do not only renew the ties between heaven and earth or between two people, but they also reconnect us with the child within each one of us, giving voice to the pain that has been silenced or repressed. Stories help us to understand our emotional responses better. So often when we resist being held and loved and run away, what we really want is to be held back and embraced. When children have a tantrum, the response should not be condemnation and disapproval, but uncondition love and understanding. Whenever we are confronted with an enormous anger surfacing within us, we should develop the skill of exploring its deeper origins of neglect, abandonment and humiliation. As much as we need to be asked "why are you crying" we also need stories that ask us "why are you angry"? There is an unspoken sadness that is waiting to be heard.

Jesus was a master storyteller. And most of his stories gave voice to those silenced and marginalized. His stories take on the perspective from below and look at the world through the eyes of simple shepherds, struggling fishermen, and scorned tax collectors. He articulates the experiences of the most vulnerable in society, women and children, the sick and demonized. And in telling their stories to illustrate the coming of God's justice and liberation, he is able to create a world, within which all can belong, within which all want to belong, even the rich and powerful, as they discover how their wealth and power traps them and robs them of their freedom. Jesus' stories speak to our common fear of feeling worthless and suggest the possibility of a new beginning.

the red egg

I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free.
I wish I could break all
the chains holding me.

I wish I could say all the
things that I should say.
Say 'em loud, say 'em
clear for the whole
round world to hear .

I wish I could share all
the love that's in my
heart. Remove all the
bars that keep us apart.

I wish you could know
what it means to be
me. Then you'd see
and agree that every
man should be free.

I wish I could give all
I'm longin' to give.
I wish I could live
like I'm longin' to live.

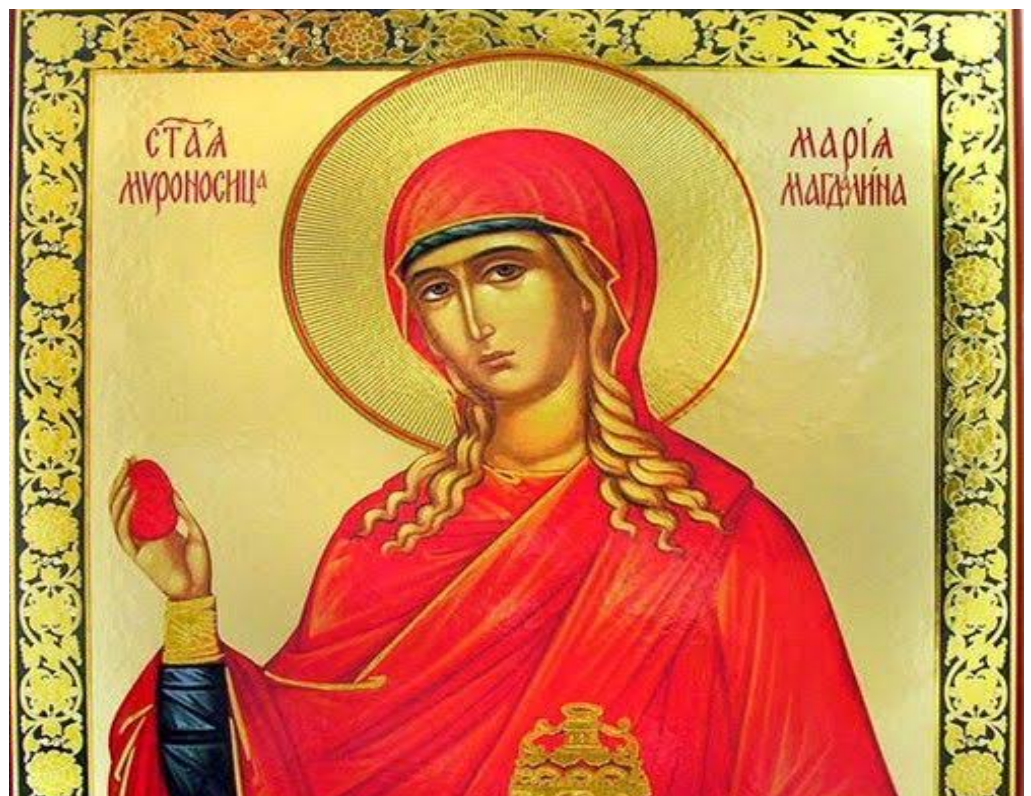
I wish I could do all the
things that I can do.
And though I'm way
over due I'd be starting
anew.

Well I wish I could be
like a bird in the sky.
How sweet it would be
If I found I could fly.

Oh I'd...

- Nina Simone

It has taken the West a long time to catch up with the East. The Eastern expressions of Christianity, from the beginning, gave Mary Magdalene a prominent role as a disciple of Christ and the first witness of the resurrection. In the West Mary Magdalene became known as the sinful woman and prostitute. Meanwhile the only historical indication we have of her is that Jesus liberated her from seven demons. He helped her to gain control over her life again, setting her free from those powers and systemic injustices which originate in a patriarchal mindset and still dominate and oppress women around the world. The discovery of the Gnostic Gospels at Nag Hammadi and more recent feminist scholarship helped to correct the sexualized portrayal of Mary and to reclaim her as Christianity's first apostle. She met the risen Christ and proclaimed his resurrection - the two decisive qualifications to be called an apostle. Legendary accounts have her travel all the way to Rome and challenge emperor Tiberius regarding Christ's resurrection. She uses an egg to illustrate the resurrection, the new life breaking forth from a piece of rock. And as Tiberius mocks her with claiming that it would be easier for the egg to turn red than for him to believe such rubbish, the egg in her hands does begin to turn red. This is why Eastern iconography often depicts Mary of Magdalene with holding a brightly shining red egg.





the third eye and ear

E.E. Cummings's "I thank you God for most this amazing" captures best the holy chaos that an experience of resurrection brings forth. The excitement and enthusiasm cannot be contained and creates its own idiosyncratic style: Words are ordered nonlogically, rules of spacing are abandoned, even punctuation itself is omitted, and words are divided across line breaks. God is encountered as the majestic and life affirming "Yes". And the poet's awakening is set in parenthesis, words spoken more to the reader than to God. The closing statement on the opening of the inner ears and eyes speaks to us of the gift of the contemplative ear and eye. It offers a depth of spiritual insight that leads to ecstasy, a moment of boundless being and deep connection with the divine and its presence in nature. I can hear Mary Magdalene say those words.

i thank You God for most this amazing

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

- e.e. cummings



at the grave

Sieger Koeder's Mary is kneeling at the tomb of Jesus. She has long, flowing hair. She wears a dark red robe. We see her face at the moment of her encounter with Jesus, the gardener. Her face is lit not by the morning sun, which is rising behind her, but by a different light emanating from the stranger's face. Is this her first or the second turning? Is that the moment where she is asked "Why are you crying? Whom are you looking for?" or is this the response to having been called by name? Her hands try to protect her eyes. The light is very bright, especially when one has looked into the darkness of the tomb for too long. Sometimes it is easier and feels safer to stay in and with the darkness than to embrace the gift of new life and light. As our eyes get accustomed to the darkness, so can our soul and inner life. We arrange ourselves and we can find comfort in not being seen, in being defeated, in being a victim. To hear this story is to reconnect with our own inner child and to hear Jesus call us by name. At that moment, just as Lazarus was called out of the tomb, we are challenged to emerge from the darkness and embrace the gift of a new life, a life where we have agency, dignity, and freedom. The tombs at left and right hand side of Mary carry the Hebrew names for Adam and Eve. Their tomb stones have cracked.



And in the midst of graves and crosses roses and lavender break through the stones and rocks and begin to turn the graveyard into a garden, another paradise. Koeder chooses roses to symbolize the triumph of joy and love that Jesus' resurrection signals. And lavender, with its blue blossoms, speaks to us of faithfulness and loyalty. God, the gardener is at work, transforming the world and renewing the connection between heaven and earth.