

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

There is a Canadian cartoonist who calls himself the “naked pastor” because he used to be a pastor. He is interested, he says, in the naked truth, and his cartoons touch on topics that can be uncomfortable for people of faith. My favorite of his cartoons is one I may have mentioned before in a sermon. It shows a large group of men taking up three fourths of the panel on the right, while three women stand in the remaining space on the left. The caption reads, “So, ladies, thanks for being the first to witness and report the resurrection, and we’ll take it from here.”

Anyone who studies the Gospel according to John closely knows that it has pretty clearly been edited from the original. Most obvious is the addition of chapter 21 onto the end. I have very little doubt that John originally ended with the Thomas story at the end of chapter 20. The last words in chapters 20 and 21 are very similar, but in chapter 20 they convey a profound theological point, while in chapter 21 – the addition – they are rather banal, if I dare say so. In recent years I have learned about less obvious suspected editing in John that has the effect of minimizing Mary Magdalene’s role. That’s a whole can of worms that we can open sometime in an Adult Sunday School class. But for the first time in all my years of being exposed to this resurrection story from John, I have suddenly realized that something similar might be going on here. I have long thought that this was a strange story with Peter and the other disciple racing to the tomb, looking in, and then going back home as if nothing had happened. What I haven’t appreciated until now is how it interrupts the story of Mary Magdalene, like somebody butting in on a dinner conversation and saying, “ooh, ooh, the same thing happened to me! I was there too!” Peter is given the honor of going into the tomb first, before the other disciple, who we presume is John, and who gets to look in before Peter. But this whole episode with these two guys jockeying for position really adds nothing to the story. It just makes it weird. Take out verses 2 through 10, or even 2 through 11, and you have a much more coherent narrative featuring only Mary Magdalene and her encounter with the risen Jesus. She is both the first to the tomb and the first to look in. Like the other disciples later on, it takes time for her to grasp what has happened. She assumes that “they,” parties unknown, have stolen Jesus’ body. (Notice that she says the same thing to the angels and to Jesus that she said to the disciples in verse 2. These second utterances are the source of the first if my suspicion is correct.) But then Jesus speaks her name and she knows that it is him. And she is the one sent with the news, not that “the tomb is empty and I don’t know what’s going on,” but with the confident, unequivocal message, “I have seen the Lord!” A woman, not one of the twelve, not the previous inner circle of Peter, James, or John, not any of the men but a woman is entrusted with the office of “apostle to the apostles.” Jesus sends her to the men with the message of his resurrection and his imminent return to the Father.

What does this mean for us? It means that John was telling us in no uncertain terms that God in Jesus is doing a new thing, ushering in a new creation, a new way of ruling, that is different from the old ways. And that is really good news for all who are oppressed, marginalized, exploited and ignored. But it might sound like bad news to those who benefit from the way the world works now because they lose some of the status, privilege, and deference they have become accustomed to. The earliest expressions of the church took to heart the radical nature of what God was doing in Jesus and in them. The faith was first spread largely among

slaves, and women in some cases were prominent leaders of the earliest Christian communities. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for this to change and for men to reassert themselves and downplay the radical nature of the gospel. And by the early fourth century, the church in some places was fully coopted by the state.

But Jesus never gives up on his disbelieving and misbelieving disciples, and that includes us. In Holy Baptism he calls us each by name and entrusts us, all of us, with the radical, life-transforming, world-changing news that we have gathered to celebrate tonight and that is for all people, the news that Christ is risen! Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!) He is indeed. May we trust and embody that great good news, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.