

Easter Sunday 2019

John 20:1-18

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC, Camden, April 21 2019

Lisa Fitzgerald was driving down the road in a New Orleans neighborhood when she noticed two boys by the side of the road. They appeared to her to be about ten or eleven years old. When she saw their faces, she noticed that they looked distraught and frightened. Just as she was about to pass them, one of them lifted a gun and shot at her. Lisa Fitzgerald was hit in the face but survived. As it turned out, the boys had been told that they had to shoot someone if they wanted to be accepted into a gang. Lisa had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And for what?

As she reflected on all this, she said: *"I wasn't the victim and they weren't the victims. We were trapped in this war that started long before us."* I suppose she was referring to a kind of war we inflict on each other for complex reasons, including the ravages of inequality, social fragmentation and isolation, increasing tribalism, and the legacy of racism. Lisa quit her job as a health executive and started to reach out to gangs and other community members to work for change. She is now in her fifties and finds herself relating to a kind of expanded family. She regularly has up to 40 seventeen year olds hanging out at her house. When she asked them why they come to her, they said: "Because we knocked and you opened."¹ How was she able to respond to this senseless violence with such compassion and grace? How was she able to allow her heart to be broken open rather than just broken? How was she able to envision a different future for everyone?

Lisa Fitzgerald is one of the people who unknowingly also helped to lift David Brooks, columnist for the New York Times, out of the shadow of the valley of death of his own life. How so? Brooks, a well-educated, successful and wealthy Jewish man, tells the story of his own plunge into and emergence from loneliness and depression in his new book [The Second Mountain](#). About six years ago, after the children were off to college and his marriage had ended in

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/opinion/culture-compassion.html>

I also heard David Brooks interviewed about his book on the PBS Newshour on April 17, 2019.

divorce, he found himself living alone in a small apartment. He continued to seek refuge in working all the time but suddenly found himself bereft and alone, especially on the weekends. Where others might keep plates and silver ware, he just kept office supplies. He noticed how he had favored productivity over relationships and had avoided dealing with difficult emotional issues and spiritual challenges by being a workaholic achiever.

In his book, Brooks also writes about the growing and painful general disconnect between people in our increasingly polarized world. The fact that our country particularly prizes individualism has contributed to a growing sense of fragmentation and isolation. And when we do connect with others it has increasingly become a matter of retreating into modern versions of tribalism. Social media, as much as it connects, has been part of creating this trend. This is all playing itself out from Washington to our borders and to our own communities. 47,000 people commit suicide per year and 72,000 take a drug overdose in this country. The Midcoast and Camden have had their tragic share of this. We all know this too well.

In the face of all this, Brooks found his bearings with the help of so-called “weavers.” Weavers is simply a metaphor that describes people like Lisa Fitzgerald who manage to be broken open by life rather than just get broken by their suffering and the suffering of the world. Weavers are able to see the whole person, including their traumas and their gifts. Weavers affirm “radical mutuality,” knowing that we need each other to heal and to grow. Weavers know that each created being is a particular thread needed to create a woven communal whole.

In our story from the Easter Gospel, we hear how three disciples begin their distinct journey of moving from having their hearts broken to being broken open for a greater sense of belonging. In a way, they and we are all being asked to become weavers. Given that the readings of the coming Sundays focus on male disciples’ journey with the risen Christ, I will draw our attention today specifically to Mary Magdalene. She had gone to two disciples in her distress at finding the stone rolled away from the tomb. Let’s pick-up the story where the two others have come and gone. Now Mary remains outside the empty tomb weeping (20:11). She finally musters the courage to peek into the tomb herself. She sees two angels, one sitting at the head and one at the foot of where the body of the crucified Jesus had been lain. Perhaps they are still marking

the real presence of a whole being who had lain there, from head to toe.² Perhaps this also points to our connectedness to both earth and heaven, as Kathryn is depicting in her artwork.

The angels ask Mary Magdalene, “Woman, why are you weeping?” I wonder whether her heart is still with the trauma of the crucifixion so beautifully depicted in Kathryn’s rendition of Mary the mother holding her dead son. Mary Magdalene’s own grief has her repeating what she had said to the other disciples earlier, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him (John 20:13).” In that moment, something compels her to turn around before she has even heard a reply. Now she is face to face with the Risen One.

Jesus asks her: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” He is not trying to tease or confuse her. In the fashion of a teacher, he calls on her to name the truth of her own awareness, longing and experience. She must reconnect with the deepest truth in herself. He is fundamentally asking: *What has broken your heart so open that it makes you weep in the deepest depth of your being? Whom and what is it that you are looking for that will speak and answer to your longing?* These are existential questions spoken to all of us. Do you know what you would answer?

Mary Magdalene remains focused on wanting to care of Jesus’ body and mistakes the Risen One for the gardener, the caretaker of the graves and the vegetation around them. This is actually a very fitting image and material for another sermon to come. Let us stay with Mary Magdalene in this moment. She asks, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away (20:15).” How beautiful and precious she is in her desire to serve him whose life has been taken by cruel violence. The political and religious systems of his day have colluded to kill this messenger and agent of love. And the people have let it happen. The least she can do is to honor him in his death.

“Mary,” Jesus says suddenly, and she turns around again from her continued and preoccupied searching. “Rabbouni/Teacher,” she calls out. Hearing him speak her name removes all doubt

² Some commentators say that this scene maybe a rendition of the two angels guarding the old Ark of the covenant – now witness and guardians of a new covenant in Christ). See John K. Stendahl in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 376.

that it is Jesus.³ But before she can even begin to recover and make sense of what is happening, she is again told to let go. Notice Kathryn's image of Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Christ. He is saying: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father/Mother." To be so close to a reunion with a loved one just to be told to let go again! Just imagine!

Yet, this is not primarily about an individual reunion but a call for Mary Magdalene's participation in a drama that is still unfolding. The Risen One says to her, "Go to my brothers [and sisters] and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" He has to ascend in order to enter a more universal identity as the risen Christ. He will no longer be the localized one, the physically and uniquely one present in Jesus of Nazareth. He is to become universally accessible to all, present in all, present through all by the power of the Holy Spirit who will descend upon them all (see Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, p. 192).

Mary was able to recognize the voice of the risen one because of the depth of their particular relationship. Now she is being asked to expand her particular experience of him to the level of the universal field or web of belonging. This includes the fuller realization of her own daughterhood to none other than the living God. She is to find her voice and share this good news with others who are also on the journey of discovery and transformation.

Such transformation implies fundamental changes of consciousness. Mary and each of us are being asked to learn to see the crucified Christ in every one (including the wider creation and ourselves) who is suffering. Another is to learn to see the Easter Christ *waiting* to arise again in a person who is trapped by constraints, beliefs, perceptions, forms of oppression they cannot yet transcend. Another yet is to see and celebrate wherever the risen Christ is already emerging from the tombs in the context of real lives. This is the promise and challenge of Easter.

Easter is not primarily a story about the past but about the divine power that is always asking us to rise from our tombs – also here and now. Lisa Fitzgerald was able to rise from the tomb of

³ Gregor Robbins suggests that this evokes the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd whose sheep know his voice (John 10:4) - *in Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 377.

her suffering to serve her community in its call to resurrection. Lisa Fitzgerald can see the suffering Christ. She can already imagine the risen Christ within people who are still in some way bound. And she can proclaim where Christ has already risen in her neighborhood. People like Lisa embody for us today what Mary Magdalene was called to live in her time. May we, too, be empowered to become weavers of our communal fabric, connecting earth and heaven in one seamless web of love. Amen.