

The Gardner

“Supposing him to be the gardener....”

Nobody knew Jesus better than Mary Magdalene.

Not in the Dan Brown DaVinci Code “did Jesus have a wife and children” way of knowing.

Interesting fiction, but not a bit of fact to back it up.

But here's what we do know about Mary.

We know that Jesus freed her from seven demons.

Some say the seven were the demons of anger, pride, greed, envy, gluttony, sloth and lust.

The seven deadly sins.

Meaning that Mary, once healed, probably lived a profound life – a life not clouded by those sins, by those demons.

No one knows him better than Mary.

She walks with him, supports his band of nobodies with money and food and shelter.

She’s there when they nail him to the tree.

She’s there when the insults and the taunts are hurled at him as he hangs in agony.

She watches him struggle with thirst.

She hears him plead:

“Father, forgive, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

She watches him collapse in despair, crying out:

“Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani!”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!”

She watches him breathe his last.

Mary is there as he is taken down from the cross, into the new garden tomb.

She waits and she watches.

She knows what he looks like.

In life and in death.

When he is smiling and when he is in tortured pain.

She knows him and she knows his look.

In life and in death.

She knows him better than anyone.

Yet here she is, in the dawn of morning, mistaking him for the gardener.

Why?

Why does the one who knows him best think she’s talking to the yardman?

Some things we can say for sure.

We can say for sure that the risen Lord looks nothing like the picture we most of us have of him.

That bright shining perfect being whose feet don't even touch the ground.

That picture is in our heads because lots of artists have painted the resurrection exactly that way.

The beatific Jesus, floating on the ether.

But we can be quite sure that's not who Mary encounters.

There is something quite ordinary in who she encounters this morning — because Jesus, in his life, looks pretty ordinary.

How many of our homes have that picture of lily white, blondish, blue eyed Jesus?

A far cry from the dark skinned Middle Eastern Jew he actually is.

His look is so common, in fact, that despite his notoriety, despite all his public teaching, despite the many public debates with the religious know-it-alls, when they come to arrest him, Judas has to single him out for the cops with a kiss — lest they arrest the wrong man.

Mary sees an ordinary man this morning, here in the garden.

And I'll bet you dollars to donuts that the reason she mistakes him for the gardener — is because he has dirt on his hands.

Like any gardener!

Isn't it ironic how Easter is the great celebration that features clean clothes and white rabbits?

Easter is the day we put out our best guest towels, as we spruce up the church and grounds — as if waiting for long missed relatives to come by for a visit.

But there are no guest towels in the garden this morning.

Instead, Mary stares into the face of the one she knows better than anyone — still seeing only the face of a stranger.

There they stand.

Mary Magdalene — and the man with dirt on his hands.

Which actually makes sense when you stop and think about it.

Because, as my friend Nadia Bolz-Weber says, God always has dirt on his hands.

In Genesis, God digs into soil, bringing out the first human being; breathes into it, and voila!

An image of God is made: us!

This odd mixture of earth, breathing the breath of the divine.

In Exodus, God digs to the bottom of the Red Sea, parting its waters, leading the chosen people into a new land — and a new way of living.

Throughout the Older Testament, God continues to have dirt on his hands as he cares for the poor, the widow, and the illegal alien, meeting their most basic needs.

And here comes Jesus.

His birth is announced first to shepherds, who, I assure you, have a lot more than dirt on their hands!

As the ministry of Jesus lifts up the sick, the losers, the outcasts.

Just two weeks ago, we saw Jesus use soil and spit that he places on the eyes of the man born blind — and with dirt on his hands — Jesus gives him new eyes.

In the ordinary face of Jesus, God comes to us in our ordinary lives.

Lives that face addiction and arguments.

Lives that confront death and cancer and heart attacks and hurt feelings and misunderstood emotions and pain from childhoods long gone — all of which creates dirt on the hands of us all.

And into these, our ordinary lives, Jesus says to us:

“I’m not here to say who is good and what is evil, or who is right and what is wrong.

I’m here to serve you.

I’m here to forgive you.”

Finally, there’s one more reason why there’s dirt on these hands.

We ourselves daily dig graves in which we bury if not ourselves, then one another.

Graves dug for revenge or anger or lost hope or anxiety or shame.

As God continually and always digs us out of those graves,
restoring us to life, getting his hands dirty.

Even when we can't see it.

Even when we don't want it.

It's true, in the midst of all our troubles, God can be hard to see most of the
time.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that God is somewhere in the neighborhood.

Mary's in that place.

Still looking at him.

Not putting two and two together.

Then suddenly, the tension breaks.

He calls her name: "Mary!"

And hearing her name on his lips, she, at long last, sees him, knows him.

And he tells her then what he tells us now:

"Don't hang on to me, but GO!"

Go tell the world the truth about God!

That the God you feared or ignored or thought irrelevant has fused together
heaven and earth.

That the sacred and profane are now one; dirty hands and all!

That all of humanity is at last home free!

Saying to you, saying to me, that the life Jesus lives is the life we can live.

And when we live that life of service, of surrender, we somehow, in ways we cannot understand, find ourselves, even now, smack dab in the middle of the resurrected life!

A resurrection that happens not after we take our last breath, but here, now, today!

And who knows?

We might even find ourselves ascending with Jesus!

Not by floating off into space.

But by embracing the gift of a new way to see life and each other.

So that we might see life not through our fallen eyes.

Not through eyes that insist on judging and condemning and sizing up who is right and what is wrong.

But by developing the insight to experience life and each other and life's troubles and joys — through the Father's eyes!

It is the Father's eyes that love us despite everything.

It's the Father's eyes that love us because of everything.

Eyes that will love us all into becoming the very image of God that was always our inheritance.

When Mary finally sees his ordinary face in this ordinary garden, she learns what we too are invited to learn.

To go — and with the ordinary lives we are given, to live the life Jesus gives us to live.

A life of service and letting go.

A life that allows us to glimpse the kingdom that is breaking into the world — and the union with God that is our destiny.

This priceless gift from the God who delights in dirty hands.

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