

Mary Magdalene – sermon on painting and text



Sisters and brothers,
before Advent starts in a fortnight, let me preach one last sermon on a biblical text and a painting by the Indian artist Lucy D'Souza.
The painter's wall hanging with 7 pictures of biblical women's stories pointing towards the kingdom of heaven is about 20 years old. Lucy D'Souza produced this piece of art at an order of the German Christian Aid organisation "Brot für die Welt". Every two years they have a third world artist produce a so-called famine hanging that draws the world's attention to poverty and hunger in the country where they come from. Luca D'Souza had decided to focus on the situation of women in her home country India, and to connect the everyday lives of Indian women with the stories of their biblical sisters in the New and the Old Testament of our Bible. She lets the women of India become parts of the biblical stories of liberation & rescue, resistance & revolution. The women in saris experience healing, love, hope & resurrection...



The 7 pictures Lucy D'Souza painted can be seen on the front page of your bulletin, or here at the front of the church hanging at the altar.

Here we have the woman from Luke 13 kneading into the flour of every day life the yeast of the kingdom of heaven, the work of a woman becoming an image for the kingdom of God... (that is the middle picture). Then at the top left we have the women of the Exodus singing and rejoicing with Miriam over the miraculous rescue at the shores of the Red Sea. Lucy D'Souza painted the fearless midwives (top middle) who helped Moses and innumerable other Hebrew baby boys to stay alive by resisting the Pharaoh's command to kill the innocent children. Then we have a picture of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz – those three people who overcome boundaries of race, sex and status and become not only friends but a family. At the bottom right we can see Mary and Elizabeth singing Mary's song of God coming and making all things new... of their babies being born and the world turning upside down... In the bottom middle we have this picture of a Canaanite mother meeting Jesus the healer who saves the mother and the daughter's life. And today we come to the bottom left...

Before I reveal to you which biblical story stands behind that painting, I would like to follow the artist's advice and simply invite you to look at the painting, take some time, ponder at the sight of it, and explore it...

What do you see?

I see this woman walking through a door. She is wearing a sari in deep red. She steps over the threshold proudly, gracefully, beautifully. Her whole body expresses movement and determination. Her legs, her feet beneath the dress make strong steps into the room. Both of her hands are open to greet and to share... maybe to hold the folds of her dress...? The beaming light behind her seems to encourage her movement and increases her speed. She almost flies, she is something like an angel – like the angel who announced to Mary the birth of Jesus. The path she walks is full of light. The sunshine on her back warms her, fills her, maybe moves her... And the message she has to tell must obviously be one of light and life...

Her head is held upright, her mouth smiles a calm & careful smile. And her eyes are gazing at 5 men standing next to the door through which she enters the dark room.

Are they expecting her, fearing her, trying to hide?

The men stand in the shade. The darkest spots in the picture are the ones furthest away from the door. Through the door falls the light the woman seems to bring.

Only the heads of the 2 men next to the woman are somehow illuminated by the light she brings. The other three remain in the dark.

What all men do is: look at this woman stepping over the threshold of their room. All their eyes are focussed on the woman. 2 look straight at her face. Meet her gaze. 3 hold their heads slightly bent. Their eyes are open, maybe curious. All are looking forward to the message she may bring. Their mouths are shut, but not far away from a small smile...

The atmosphere is calm, peaceful and friendly.

2 of the men wear white stoles. White is the colour of the divine... - probably they are men of God, or touched by God or... we will see☺

The shirts of the men are blue for the poor peasants, green for the wealthier merchants, yellow for new life and new beginnings and red for the fullness of life and love itself.

The only person who is entirely dressed in red is the woman.

With quick steps and open hands she brings life into a room that has before been dominated by stillness & darkness.

And behind her comes the light... comes the sun.

The Beatles' song "Here comes the sun" came to my mind when I continued to look at the doorway full of light.

Song

**Here comes the sun ...
here comes the sun and I say it's alright**

**Little darling it's been a long cold lonely winter
little darling it feels like years since it's been here
here comes the sun ...
here comes the sun and I say it's alright**

**Little darling the smiles returning to the faces
little darling it seems like years since it's been here
here comes the sun ...
here comes the sun and I say it's alright**

**Sun sun sun here it comes
sun sun sun here it comes
sun sun sun here it comes
sun sun sun here it comes
sun sun sun here it comes**

**Little darling I feel that ice is slowly melting
little darling it seems like years since it's been clear
here comes the sun ...and so on.**

But back to the painting: 3 of the men are holding symbols in their hands. The man in blue holds a key, the two other may be holding books. Could the key be held by Peter – later in Christian tradition the key holder to the gate to heaven? And could the other two be evangelists – eventually writing down the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth whom they had just lost?

Does this ring a bell?

Do you now know which biblical passage is expressed by the painting at the bottom left of your bulletin?

Yes!?

...it is Mary Magdalene entering the Upper Room in which the disciples hide after the nightmare of Good Friday and the crucifixion. And she reveals to them the message of all messages: Jesus is alive! He has risen from the dead.

We find the words in John's gospel chapter 20 verses 1-19:

The Resurrection of Jesus

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, «They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.»

3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 They said to her, «Woman, why are you weeping?» She said to them, «They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.»

14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, «Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?» Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, «Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.»

16 Jesus said to her, «Mary!» She turned and said to him in Hebrew, «Rabbouni!» (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, «Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' »

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, «I have seen the Lord»; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Through the long Sabbath day that had followed the excruciating cruelty of Good Friday, Mary and the others who had been Jesus' friends, who had watched him die in agony, had waited to do for him the last service they could. I doubt any of them had slept much that night.

Early the next morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. And Jesus was not there...

When she arrived at the tomb the stone had been rolled away, and she set off immediately to fetch the other disciples. She went for Peter, who at once left the house together with John and ran (a bit like a race between the two really) to the tomb.

John just peered in, but Peter, hasty as ever, rushed inside.

Where Jesus' body had been they only found his grave clothes...

And we read that they went home again. What else could they do?

It was just Mary who stayed.

She remained at the tomb – weeping.

Her grief and pain at the loss of her friend were now being increased by the loss of his body... Yet in spite of her grief she plucked up the courage to look into the tomb and saw two angels sitting where Jesus must have been lying.

“Why are you weeping”, they ask. And she answers, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”

And now imagine her: while she is still speaking, she suddenly becomes aware of another presence.

She turns round, and blind with tears, Mary thinks it is the gardener.

“Why are you crying”, he asks. “Who are you looking for?”

And in despair she asks him if he knows anything of the body that has disappeared.

She only recognises Jesus when he calls her by name.

But as soon as Mary turns towards Jesus, maybe wanting to hug and hold him, he stops her saying: “Don’t hold onto me...” Don’t touch me, don’t come close...

Can you imagine Mary now?

This must have been terrible for her...

The one she thought was lost forever is standing right in front of her – and she is not allowed to touch him... to simply feel that he is back ...

This is surely the moment when Mary must learn the hard way: Jesus has come back, but never ever will he be the same... and things will never again be as they used to be.

As soon as she thought she had him back she had to learn that it was not as simple as she had hoped for a moment...

Mary had to learn to let her beloved friend go – in order to be able to hold onto him and find him and his presence anew.

At the end of John’s story about Mary meeting Jesus, it is great to read that Mary didn’t run away in fear and keep silent, but that she went and announced to the disciples that Jesus was alive!

...another little text came to my mind...

Text

**It suddenly strikes me
with overwhelming force:
it was women
who were first to spread the message of
Easter –
the unheard of!
It was women
who rushed to the disciples,
who, breathless and bewildered,
passed on the great message of all:
He is alive!
Think if women had kept silence
in the churches!**

(from No Longer Strangers)

Jesus is risen; the crucifixion is not the end of the story!

Nor does the story end with Mary’s encounter with the risen friend in the garden.

With the resurrection stories we are always reminded that this encounter is not just Mary’s, but that it is for all of us, and at all times.

It is for all of us to proclaim: “I have seen the Lord, ...and this is what he told me...”

In an traditional Easter hymn from our hymnal we sing “Every day to us is Easter with its resurrection song”... so why not discover today, as far away from Easter as one can be in the church year that the Easter story is about proclamation, about passing on good news, about faith – about our faith now. The risen Christ brings us a new order which we live and experience, and which changes the way we see the world!

Easter is about a new way to live, about encounter and change – about how Mary’s encounter in the garden can become our own life-changing encounter with Christ. It is about meeting a stranger and recognising in them the face of Christ. It is about grasping what is possible, if we’ll just see...

Mary’s story is the story of a confession of faith.

And when we talk about faith, we must constantly remind ourselves that things are not always as we would so very much want them to be: obvious, nice and easy...

Mary in the garden met a gardener who was not a gardener at all, but her beloved friend whom she mourned. And she listened to what he had to say, and brought the news to her fellow disciples.

In her mourning, in all the pain of death and sadness, she was still able not to cling to what had been before, but to grasp something entirely new, to break free of what was simply probable, predictable, likely...nice and easy...

Can we break free?

Are we open to meet God in new and surprising ways, on hard journeys through grief and pain?

Are we open to encounter the risen Christ in a way that changes our lives so much that we too, have the courage to bring the message to others!

I truly hope we can.

And with all that in mind, let us come back to the picture on our wall hanging from India. Let us see this strong woman who had just gone through hell, now standing in a door of beaming light, sharing the miracle of faith that had just happened to her.

May such a miracle happen in our lives, too.

Here comes the sun...