

Sermon on John 20:11-18 Woman in the Night



Sisters and brothers,
yet another of those stone prints from my office. I love them. I love the pictures and I liked the artist very much. Writing sermons to go with his pieces of art about Biblical women is my way of ensuring that he lives on. Achim Schuster, the creator of these prints, - one is on the front page of your bulletin today - is dead. But he lives on. His creativity inspires people still today....

Achim is dead, but his art is alive and in it we see a glimpse of what we Christians call resurrection... there is something which is stronger than death: should it be a painting, or a story, a poem or a significant way of life. Should it be the language of love a person spoke or the image of God that he could reveal to the people of his time.... Something remains, even after death... something that not only keeps the memory alive but also points into the future... resurrection.

What you see in the graphic on your bulletin today is Mary of Magdala at Jesus' empty tomb.

In the background we see the trees, somewhere outside Jerusalem. Trees on a hill. The hillside must be green, leading over onto rocky ground. Rocks and stones, white as chalk... and then in the middle of the right hand side, a big black hole. Death and the realm where the dead should be.

But he isn't: Jesus is not in his grave.

A male figure is bending down, almost crawling in – to do what?...to search?... to check?... to somehow grasp a truth beyond human understanding? He is looking again, reliving the loss and discovering the mystery of it all.

The other man in our picture is standing just round the corner. Has he not been close to the grave? Or has he just had a quick glance, and all in a hurry accepted that there was nothing left to do or to question and understand?

He stands there with open and passive hands, palms downwards. His eyes looking up... his nose and mouth are too big... all in all an awkward figure, don't you agree?

Achim Schuster's humour is revealed in how he presents the two disciples... always a little awkward, especially Peter.

His adoration comes then when we look at the young woman who attracts the immediate attention of those who look at the whole scene.

Mary, Mary of Magdala, one of Jesus' best friends. A beautiful young woman with big eyes – deep as a mountain lake - as if ready to mirror the world she's looking at, a slim nose, a full mouth.... a forehead half covered by her veil..... but we still see some strands of hair, some wrinkles. Is she frowning at a world that hasn't treated her well in the past few days? Probably she hasn't had much sleep in the night either.

Mary's body is still so that she needed only to turn her head and she'd see the empty grave. Her head, however, her gaze, is already focussing on something else.... and those eyes.... what story do they tell? It must be a mixture of disbelief, fear, surprise and love... Mary looks, not **at** something, but **beyond**. Her undivided attention lets her see more and, maybe, further than the two men can see.

Where Mary stands the first flowers can grow – out of the soil towards the spring sun. The numbness flees and gives way to tender growth and new life.

Who we don't see at all is Jesus. He is probably where we are, the spectators, those who look Mary in the eye and meditate on the picture.

Whatever let Achim choose this perspective, we are invited to look at this scene far back in history but also to look at it as part of our every day lives. We are looking at people seeking Jesus...people then and now.

Let's try to identify with Mary: this woman who'd been at Jesus' side more, and longer than the Gospels clearly tell us. She must have shared a lot with him. Her memory must have been full of events and encounters – probably many of which encourage and enable the ability to understand Jesus' resurrection.

Mary was not there when Jesus was born. No, but the woman who gave birth to him had the same name. And maybe, maybe, Mary of Magdala had heard Mary of Nazareth talk about those first days after her firstborn's birth. Those days and hours away from home, the visitors in the stable, the dreams and visions they had, the presents given, the heavenly music heard and the exile in Egypt which they had to endure....

Music

Almost definitely Mary was around when somewhere near the Lake of Galilee crowds were expecting him every time he got off the boat. And she must have remembered the day when Jairus had come to Jesus to beg him to heal his beloved daughter. And while Jairus and Jesus were still talking, there was a woman who'd secretly touched Jesus' garment because her faith in him was so strong and her despair about her illness so overwhelming, that she thought if she could only touch the seam of his coat she might be healed. And she was – instantly. She was free. She could live again.

Music

And Mary remembered that almost unbelievable day in the land of the Samaritans. Accidentally Jesus and his friends were still on the road at noon.... Nobody usually travelled at the hottest time of the day. But there they were. And there was this woman a foreigner, who came to fetch water at the well at midday. Only outcasts did that. Only those who did not dare to come and fetch water when everybody else did....only those who society had excluded and who were discriminated against.... Nevertheless, Jesus talked to her, asked her for water and her response to him showed a surprising knowledge of culture and theology. The conversation between the two revealed astonishing parts of this woman's story... and there would always remain the question: How did Jesus know? At the end of the encounter, that not only surprised Jesus' disciples but also the local people of that area, Jesus declared himself to be the Messiah.... discussing theology with the stranger had taken him there.

Music

Or, in Mary's mind's eye, there must have appeared another picture, more than that: a picture and a beautiful smell. She recalled the feast celebrated in the house of Simon the leper who Jesus had healed. The table was set, the food ready, the guests had appeared. Light heartedly they were talking and chatting, and lighting oil lamps and candles as the sun had just set. They were all in high spirits, when suddenly this woman burst in, a beautiful woman, and drew a flask of extremely expensive perfume out of the folds of her dress and poured it over Jesus' head. The room filled with the scent... Mary could, even now in the garden, smell it... Then there was this nasty discussion about the money which the perfume could have been sold for... and Mary's heart warmed when she remembered Jesus' response: Leave the woman alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. It was if she had known that Mary and the other women later, after Jesus' death, would not be able to do so again because his body had already disappeared.

Music

Then Mary remembered Martha and Mary and the little twist at their home when Martha's hard work bore this poisonous grudge against her sister Mary. Or later on the road near their home, when Martha had walked towards Jesus to tell him that if he had been available and around their brother Lazarus would not have died. In the discussion that followed, Martha openly confessed that she thought that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world. Mary remembered Martha there at the empty grave: housekeeper and theologian in one person.

Music

Then, of course, in Mary's memory there were the last few days and hours before Jesus' death. She remembered herself and some other people, Mary the mother and one of the male disciples, standing there at Jesus' cross.... watching him

being tortured, watching him die, hearing his last cry.... then the sudden darkness... as if the sun had suddenly refused to shine as the only response to such inhumanity and violence.

Mary remembered the danger they were in - there at the cross, and later when they hid in the upper room. She remembered the sleepless night and how they got up in the early morning hours, to attend to Jesus dead body with the last small kindness they could provide – anointing his body and saying goodbye.

Music

She came early when it was still dark. What a few words do describe such a dangerous enterprise. Crucifixion was the death sentence of the Roman oppressors to eliminate political opponents. For relatives and friends the consequences were excruciating: burying enemies of the system and mourning over them was prohibited. In many cases those who were weeping over the loss of a killed family member, were crucified themselves.

Despite the risk, Mary (and probably other women friends) went to the tomb. When she didn't find the body she ran back to Peter to tell him. With two male disciples she returned to the garden (and here we are back at our graphic). A close relationship to Jesus is shown in the few sentences now spoken. Mary weeps, Mary is desperate and then the climax comes! Jesus talks to her. She recognises him, but then he seems to draw back - "Do not hold onto me.." he says - hold ,touch...**απτου** in Greek means to be part of the life of the other person. And when Jesus denies that to Mary, he says "What I am doing now, where I am now, you can't follow me. I am in another world. **But:** do go to my sisters and brothers and tell them..."

Mary's mission is to announce to the others that Jesus is alive! Yet in another world - and what connects them is God. Jesus says he is going "to my God and to your God." Jesus' God is, and remains, the God of his friends.

What seemed to be a privilege to him alone while he was still alive, is now something they all share. The love of Jesus, his strength, his close relationship to the father, can from now on be lived and experienced by all of them, by all of those who love him and want to love him.

And if we trust the tale in John 20, Mary does not hesitate but sets off and tells the world – once and for all..

Look in Mary's eyes on Achim's graphic. There is pain but there is also a dream! The dream of a future for them: connected with Jesus, bound together, fearless, faithful, promising.

Mary grows through loss and pain, she enters a new life and becomes the apostle of the apostles.

May we all – no matter what - simply be given the grace to do the same. Amen.

Song: Woman in the Night MH 274