

I

The pastor was brand new in town. He'd been on the job less than two weeks when one of the longtime members of the church died. The pastor met with the family and the funeral director and got all the details for the service, a simple graveside ceremony in the local cemetery.

On the appointed day of the funeral, the pastor drove out to the cemetery well ahead of the appointed hour. He'd only been by the cemetery once, and he wanted to make sure he was there in plenty of time. As he turned off the highway and passed the cemetery gate, he spotted the tent and chairs that had dutifully arranged, the casket already in place and ready. He parked his car several yards away, put on his vestments and grabbed his service book, and took refuge under the shade of a nearby tree while he waited on the family and friends of the deceased. The cemetery workers standing nearby the tent gave the pastor a silent nod, and then went back to their muted conversations.

After a short while, some of the family and friends of the deceased began to arrive and take their places under the tent. None of the faces were familiar to the pastor, but again, he was brand new and town and hadn't met many people yet. He assumed the quizzical looks he was getting from some of the family and friends were simply because he hadn't yet been formally introduced to them.

However, as more people began to

arrive at the graveside, the pastor still had yet to recognize a familiar face, and the hour of the service was drawing near. Just then, a man wearing a nametag of the local funeral home made his way over to where the pastor was waiting in the shade, that same quizzical look on his face.

It was in that moment that the pastor realized that he was in the right cemetery, on the right day, at the right time. He was just at the wrong graveside – his were just out of sight on the other side of a hill, about 300 yards away.

At a walking pace just short of a sprint, the pastor hustled over to his car and tried not to squeal the tires as he raced to the other side of the cemetery.

II

We pastors spend time visiting cemeteries. When death comes, oftentimes part of a pastor's response to the death is to accompany the family and friends of the deceased as they bring the remains of their loved one to their final resting place. Not all cemeteries are the same, of course, but all cemeteries, by their very nature, are what I call a threshold place – a place that marks sharp dividing lines – lines between the living and the dead – lines between the past and the present – lines between what was and what is to come.

When we stand in a cemetery, we are reminded again of some of the realities of our human condition. In a cemetery, we are brought face to face with the knowledge that

someday, we, too will die, as will everyone we know and love.

There are cemeteries and burial places in every country in the world, and they are as diverse as the cultures that built and maintain them. But all cemeteries, wherever they are, are threshold places – places where we stand on the boundary between life and death.

III

And that's the setting for our story today from the gospel according to John. We pick up the story after the body of Jesus was wrapped with spices and wrapped in linen cloth and brought to a garden where there was a new tomb – in other words, a cemetery.

So listen now for a Word from God from John 20:1-18

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. 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.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that

had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). 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." ' 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

John tells us that early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, three of Jesus' disciples stood in a cemetery. All three had witnessed Jesus' crucifixion. All three had seen his lifeless body taken down from the cross. Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, all three looked inside the tomb and saw that it was empty.

And when presented with these facts, presented with the reality that the line between life and death is maybe not so sharp as we'd previously been led to believe, the two men did not know what to do or where to go, so they did what people usually do when they don't know what to do or where to go. They went home.

But not Mary. Mary stayed. Mary stayed at the threshold, at the border, at the boundary. Mary remained in the place of ambiguity. Mary continued to ask questions through her tears. Even though there was so much confusion and misunderstanding and pain, Mary stayed. She could have gone home like the others. She could have packed it in. But she stayed in the cemetery.

And her persistence in spite of the pain, her determination in spite of the doubt, her fortitude in spite of the fear, is what makes Mary Magdalene a model of Easter faith.

IV

I imagine, my friend, that this has been a hard season for you. I imagine that

you've had more than your share of pain, more than a little bit of doubt, more than just a smidge of fear. My friend, having Easter faith does not mean that you have it all figured out.

Easter faith does not mean that you have all the answers.

Easter faith just means that you have the kind of faith that is willing to stay in that threshold place, that place of mixed up emotions of joy and despair, of doubt and hope, of confusion and clarity, even when others around you have long since given up and gone home.

Easter faith means you keep asking questions, even if there are no obvious or easy answers.

And so my prayer for you on this Easter morning, my friend, is that whatever threshold, whatever boundary, whatever life-defining moments you face in your life, you will face them with the Easter faith of your great-great-great-grandmother Mary Magdalene.

V

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, the resurrected Jesus met Mary in the cemetery.

It strikes me that after his death and resurrection, Jesus could have made his first appearance at any number of other places. He could have gone to Pontius Pilate's headquarters. He could have gone to the

court of the high priest. He could have gone to the Temple in Jerusalem or to the Forum in Rome.

But the resurrected Jesus shows up at the boundary – at the threshold – at the cemetery.

And so on this Easter day, we who live out our discipleship in Jesus remember that we are most likely to encounter him not at the center of things, not where the movers and shakers do their moving and shaking, but out at the threshold places of this life.

Boundary places, by their very nature, are uncomfortable ones. Boundary places like cemeteries and hospitals and courtrooms and prisons and homeless shelters are full of ambiguity and confusion and emotion. But those are just the kinds of places where we who claim the name of Jesus are most likely to encounter him.

And if we will but stay at those threshold places of life, even when others around us have packed it in, if we will keep asking questions, even when the answers aren't readily apparent, if we will have some of the faith of our great-great-grandmother Mary Magdalene to stand in the cemetery, maybe, we, too, will hear Jesus call our name.

And when Jesus meets us in the cemetery and calls our name, our tears of sorrow will turn to tears of joy. When Jesus meets us in the cemetery and calls our name, our grief and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. When Jesus meets us in

the cemetery and calls our name, we, too, will stand and exclaim, "I have seen the Lord!"

He is risen, and he has gone on ahead of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.