

Dirty fingernails

"Supposing him to be the gardener..."

Nobody knew Jesus better than Mary Magdalene.

No, I don't mean in the Dan Brown, DaVinci Code did Jesus have a wife and children sort of knowing.

That's all interesting fiction, but there's not a bit of fact to back it up.

But here's some of what we do know about Mary.

We know that out of Mary came seven demons, and that was the beginning of her getting to know Jesus so well.

Some say the seven demons Jesus tossed out of her were the demons of anger, pride, greed, envy, gluttony, sloth and lust, what we today call the seven deadly sins.

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

No one knew him better than Mary.

She walked with him, supported his band of nobodies with money and food and shelter.

She is there when they nail him to the tree.

She is 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 say "Father, forgive, they don't know what they're doing."

She watches him collapse in aloneness, pleading: "Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani!"
"My God, my God, why have you forgotten 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 early break of morning, mistaking him for the gardener.

Why do you suppose?

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

Some things I think 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 the risen Lord – sort of a bright shining perfect being whose feet don't even touch the ground.

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

The beatific Jesus, floating on the ether.

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

There is something quite ordinary in who she encounters this morning.

And we know something else for sure.

Jesus, in his life, looks pretty ordinary.

When I was in Kenya this past summer, I can't tell you how many poor Kenyan farmers have nailed to the mud hut walls the picture of Jesus who looks a lot like me, but younger, with a beard – all fair skin, fair eyes, light hair -- nothing at all like a dark skinned Middle Eastern Jew.

Which is something else we know for sure.

Jesus doesn't look at all like me.

He is a Middle Eastern Jew.

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 under his fingernails.

Like any gardener, I'll bet you he has dirt under his fingernails!

It's funny how EASTER is the great celebration that features clean clothes and white rabbits and, not so long ago, starched bonnets.

One priest notices how Easter feels like the day we put out our best guest towels, as we spruce up the church and grounds while waiting for long missed relatives to come by for a visit.

But there are no guest towels in the garden this morning as Mary stares into the face of the one she knows better than anyone – still seeing only the face of the yardman.

There they stand, Mary Magdalene and a man with dirt under his fingernails.

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

You see, God always has dirt under his fingernails when it comes to us.

In Genesis, God digs into the mud and brings out the first human being; breathes in it, and voila!

An image of God is made: us, this odd mixture of mud that breathes the breath of the divine.

In Exodus, God digs all the way to the bottom of the Red Sea, parting its waters, as he leads the chosen people into a new land – into a new way of living.

Throughout the Older Testament, God continues to have dirt under his fingernails as he takes care that the poor, the widow, the illegal alien have their most basic needs met, as he plucks from supposedly unclean foreigners

the powerful women who form the backbone of the lineage of the people of God.

And here comes Jesus.

His birth is announced first to shepherds, who, I assure you, have a lot more than just dirt under their fingernails – and his ministry that lifts up the sick, the loser, the outcast, the blind.

Just two weeks ago, we peered in and saw Jesus digging up mud and spit, making a mudpack that he places on the eyes of the man born blind and with dirt under his fingernails, we see Jesus give 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 create dirt under the fingernails of us all.

And into these our lives, Jesus says to us: “I’m not here to say who is good and who is evil, or who is right and who is wrong; I’m here to serve you, I’m here to forgive you.”

And so, there is one more reason why there is dirt under these fingernails.

We daily dig for ourselves graves in which we bury if not ourselves, then one another; graves dug for revenge or anger or fear or lost hope or anxiety or shame.....and God continually and always and daily digs us out of those graves, restoring us to life, getting his fingernails 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, he’s hard to see most of the time, sometimes it’s hard to even believe he’s somewhere in the neighborhood.

Don’t feel bad, you’re in good company.

Still looking at him, still, not putting two and two together, suddenly the tension breaks.

He calls her name: “Mary!”

And hearing him call her name, she sees him again, perhaps for the first time?

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 God is not an angry old man in the sky just waiting to knock you down – but God himself has been knocked down – all the way down – and he is back, alive, dirty fingernails and all, 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 forgiveness, we somehow, in ways we cannot understand, find ourselves even now smack dab in the middle of the resurrected life!

It's a resurrection that happens not after we take our last breath, but now, even as we breathe.

Who knows, but we might find ourselves even ascending with Jesus, not by floating off into space, but by the gift of a new way to see.

So that we might see and live in and experience life, no longer through our fallen eyes, no longer through eyes that insist on judging and condemning and sizing up who is right and who is wrong, but 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 is the Father's eyes that love us because of everything, eyes that will indeed love us all into the very image of God we have always been meant to be.

When she finally sees his ordinary face in this ordinary garden, Mary 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 forgiveness – a life that every day opens us to glimpse the kingdom that is coming, the divinity that is our heritage, a life that is only possible by the God who delights in dirty fingernails.

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