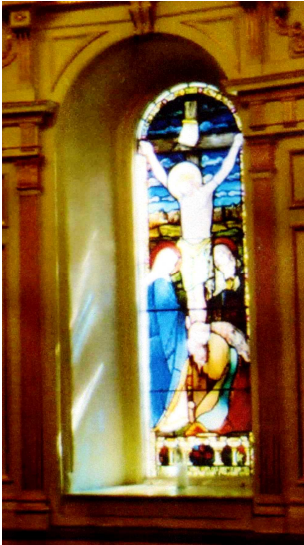


Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 19:25b-27



Behind me you can see a stained glass version of the story we're telling today. Even in this light, you will no doubt be taken by the beauty of this window. It is a balanced composition, ordered and organized by the cross, itself; the intimate scene is set off delicately by the arch of rosettes and the little balustrade at the bottom decorated with flowers.

In our window, Jesus' body is anything but bruised and broken; it is not even rumpled. He appears remarkably clean, you could say immaculate.

The scene is essentially bloodless; there's just a hint of bleeding under the crown of thorns; some minor dribbles from the nails that penetrate his hands and feet, a couple of droplets fall from the miniscule gash where the centurion's sword pierced his lifeless body.

It is almost pretty, isn't it? Jesus' loincloth looks like what I'd imagine a fine pair of silk boxer shorts might look like.

If there are tears in this window, they are very discreet tears. To be sure, however, there is grief. Look how Mary Magdalene, ravishingly beautiful, her hair a perfect pre-Raphaelite fantasy, expresses this grief in her tender embrace of Jesus' feet.

This is a portrait of silence however: all lips are closed, not agonizingly agape like that those we can recall in Munch's scream.

This window is not my image of that day. No, when I envision Christ' passion, I see a hideous scene, a crime scene really, enacted on a day filled with taunting and teasing, a day when political scores were being settled and doctrinal disputes adjudicated not with reason and evidence, but with swords and whips and the screamed whims of an angry mob. I see a day of humiliation, following shocking betrayals and denials; a dirty, disordered noisy, hurried day – as rushes to judgment always are. After all, this all had to be completed before the feasting

could begin. The passion is a scene of torture and terror, culminating in a toxic brew of state-assisted and vigilante murder.

The story and the cross evoke acute anxieties, primal then, ubiquitous now. The road to – and surely that afternoon at – Golgotha is strewn with scary tests, as Deborah called them in her sermon this noon. Tests of loyalty (is it true that our best friends can betray and deny us; can we not trust our friends and loved ones with our lives?); tests of will (can we resist the temptation to take an easy way out?); tests of restraint (can we forgive those who harm us grievously?); tests of fidelity (should we obey a remote and largely absent father who expects obedience, even unto death?); tests of love (can we leave behind our mother and others we adore?).

These tests are as new as they are old; you could say they that, by now, they are hard-wired in our brains.

I once met a fellow who had recovered from a brain cancer from which no one else had ever recovered. His deft surgeons removed a malignant tumor the size of a small tangerine from the front of his brain. Afterwards, he had no loss of memory, motion, or emotion. He was just himself. But he was also stunned and curious, so he asked his neurologist, how could this be? He asked: How could I lose this much tissue and yet have no residual effects of the loss? The surgeon paused and answered: “Well, there are a lot of things that we don’t understand about the brain. We think there are whole parts of the brain that are just roped off for future use.” Roped off for future use.

Jesus knew about these roped off areas. I discovered one of those areas in my own brain after I became a father. If you are a parent, you too know exactly what I mean, for when you become one, you discover a small part of your brain that you didn’t know before that is now always aware of and sensitive to the welfare of your child or children. Welfare isn’t what I mean. That’s verbal timidity. What I mean to say is that you are afraid that something terrible will happen to your child; indeed your very worst fear of all is that your child will die; die before you do. It is truly this unimaginable prospect (and a lot of other less dramatic ones) that in a small but persistent way is always gnawing in that part of your brain that used to be roped off for future use.

In today’s story, Jesus takes us to this very place. He drops the ropes. Indeed, this is a test that Jesus is forced to face, but he doesn’t face it alone. Like all tragedies, this one involves a community. It’s a story with many victims and many notable survivors. We know what happened to Judas. From [Donatello’s](#) alarming sculptural version of her, we can surmise that Mary Magdalene never recovered from the terror of that day. How could she have? In a museum in Florence, you can stand with her, beneath a crucifixion. You can witness how

grief ravaged her beauty; how her gown is now little more than a bunch of shabby rags; her smile once alluring, now a grimace; her teeth, once perfect, now broken and missing; her lovely, lovely hair, now all matted and dirty. It's an unspeakable tragedy to lose one you love and to be alone.

Of Mary's—Jesus' mother's—later life, we know a bit more. She appears to have fared better than Mary Magdalene, dying a peaceful death of relatively old age, her beauty intact, her composure serene. How could this be? Mary suffered what I just said most of us fear most—the death of her own son, a death that her son “permitted” to happen, a death she witnessed directly on that nasty, dusty, degraded hill of torture and death.

How did she survive what for us is the unimaginable loss of her child? In the economy Christ's last words, we can find an answer, for Mary surely, but perhaps also we can find a new mandate that will help us in the tests we face, those anxieties hiding in the parts of our brain that have been roped off for future use.

“Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother”

This is Jesus in another, we might say his final, act of healing as the Son of Man.

The words, themselves, remind us and take the form of a simple “introduction” – one we might make to forge a new acquaintance between two people who meet through us. These words don't simply describe or declare, however. As one might expect from the Gospel writer John, these words actually change the world.

We have, in Jesus' “introduction” of his mother to his disciple and his disciple to his mother, what amounts to the creation of a new family...just as the performative vows in a marriage ceremony do. What was true a moment ago of two people and the world they inhabit is no longer true. We have a new world now.<sup>1</sup>

Against the broken bonds and the ripped fabric of the world that afternoon, Jesus used a handful of common words to make a huge repair. *Tikkun*. These are the

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<sup>1</sup> Of course this is the foundational moment of Marianism and is thus, for many Christians, a much larger and more significant world-changing moment than I make of it here. We could see this exchange as Jesus' attempt to make sure someone was designated – “his beloved disciple” – to care for his mother after Jesus' death. Marians place emphasis on the first sentence, where Jesus clearly “enlarges” Mary's maternity to include John and indeed all the disciples (as John isn't even named). Jesus' use of the word, “Woman” instead of “Mother” is also an intriguing element of this story – one that makes its significance more “universal” and less local to the scene at Calvary – that would make a good subject for a meditation in and of itself. And Mary Magdalene's story, from here at the Cross to the discovery at the tomb and then to the “nolo mi tangere” episode a few days later is yet another strand to be explored sometime.

parting gifts from Jesus, the gifts of a new family, a new genealogy, a new set of relationships, a new body in which we are invited to share.

This is a bequest from Jesus. It is an inheritance we do not need to die to claim. The gift of membership in a larger and older family than any we might otherwise imagine – and the mutual obligations this membership entails – is a source of true peace to be gathered from the events of that chaotic day. It is for us to remember as we undergo the tests that lie ahead for us.

WD Burns  
Good Friday 2009