

Reflections in Solitude — Week 3

Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

In speaking with others about these days, one of the overarching themes is learning to live with uncertainty. We can do our best to shield ourselves from the virus itself. We can collect information, take heart from the good result of our efforts, and find ways to settle in for a winter of solitude. We can try to be proactive about protecting any assets we might have and strategizing for the future.

But, in the end, most people I talk to seem to resign themselves to taking one day at a time, living moment by moment. This is all we can know, all we can muster as we continue to move together through this season of trauma, dis-ease and upheaval that began with the first outbreak of the summer bushfires.

For this reason, we may be able to relate to the beloved community of John's Gospel as never before. The causes for the change and uncertainty may be different. But the mood and its impact on the community is something we share.

Speaking into a time of history much like ours, the story of the empty tomb seeks to address the question: *Where is the Lord now, as we struggle and flourish, love and live?* In response, the Gospel narrative gives two distinct revelations, both intent on bringing insight, direction and hope to those who believe.

In hearing about the missing body from Mary, two of Jesus' disciples rush to the garden to see for themselves. From their vantage point inside the tomb, the disciples see the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, literally the "face veil", rolled up in a place by itself. This may seem like a curious detail but, as we know, details are always there for a reason.

The cloth from Jesus' head, folded with deliberation and set apart from the grave clothes, alludes to the veil of Moses. After encountering God, Moses would cover himself with a veil in order to make the radiance from his face bearable for the people.

As the new Moses, Jesus' face veil is no longer needed. Like Moses who removed the veil whenever he ascended to meet God, so Jesus has put aside the veil of flesh as he returns to the presence of his Father.

*Where is
Christ now,
as we struggle
and flourish,
love
and live?*

In seeing the folded cloth, the Beloved Disciple believes. Jesus has accomplished the work he was given. He has revealed the love of God for the world and has testified to the truth. Now he has returned to the Father, just as he promised (John 14:1–14).

This is the first revelation in the post-crucifixion story. *Where is the Lord?* Christ is dwelling with the Father and the Spirit.

You might pause here and sit with this first revelation... What might be on offer for you in it? What difference, if any, does it make to know our beloved friend Jesus—the one who knows our human joys and sufferings firsthand—is now abiding with God? How might the image of the Triune God communing in love shape your prayer?



After seeing the veil and believing, Peter and the Beloved Disciple return to their homes. Jesus has come and gone. Their lives have been changed, but they do not yet understand the necessity and meaning of the resurrection. For them, for now, the story is over.

But like the lover in search of her beloved in the Song of Songs, Mary will continue the quest. Though a dead body might seem like cold comfort, for Mary, Jesus was an anchor, a constant reassurance in a world of turmoil. As long as she had this place to visit him, speak with him, remember his voice, she would be okay. But her grief was pierced by an even greater sorrow—she cannot find her beloved.

Revelation and belief in this Gospel are dependent upon seeing and believing, but Mary's search is hampered by her tears. She is so fixated on what she has lost, she cannot see what is being revealed—something even more wondrous and life-giving than the comfort of Jesus' body and his grave. Even when Jesus himself stands before her and speaks to her, her grief does not allow her to recognise him.

But then, "Mary!" says Jesus. At the sound of her name, she turns and sees the Gardener for who he is. Mary's turning is one of conversion—a turning towards God and the gift of true and abundant life. For Mary was already facing Jesus when he called her name. Her turn was not literal or situational, but spiritual, the opening of the eyes of her heart that enabled her to see and believe.

From the Greek, Jesus' words to Mary could be translated, "Not me myself (emphatic) continue to touch/relate to" but "Go to my brothers and sisters." The time for human relationship and exchange between Jesus and Mary is over. The new locus of Christ's presence in the world is the beloved community of sisters and brothers. The Spirit of Christ dwells among the believers and it is to this emerging community where Jesus redirects Mary's heart and hope.

So, where is the Lord? Not only with the Father, but dwelling in each of us and all creation, here and now, by the Spirit. This is the second revelation of the empty tomb.

How might this inform and give shape to how you see and relate to others and creation? In what ways are we invited to turn away from the grief of what has past towards the life God has for us today? How, like Mary, are we called to bear witness to the ongoing presence of Christ in our world? Again, you might spend time contemplating what has been revealed...



Abide in us, Lord God,
that we may abide in You,
locked to You,
spirit to Spirit,
in the deep mystery
of God and humanity.

—Margaret Cropper