

No time to linger: John 20:1-18

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. Dark. First light. Dawn. A few minutes of extraordinary encounter. This scene at the tomb of Jesus bestows a supreme gift upon the beloved of God. Time and place and character unfold and then reveal a threshold through which the hearer of the word may enter. Here, as in an icon, you experience Mary's transformation from desolation to animation, from inertia to action. Within a brief moment, a lifetime of journeys over oceans, abysses, deserts and mountains condenses and collapses into one life-defining revelation. Like Mary, you, the beloved, transfigure from myrrh bearer to message bearer.

Mary Magdalene expected no such thing. She just came in the dark. What kind of sabbath had she passed the day before? Surely not a day of holy rest and paradisaical anticipation. More likely, she spent her sabbath in a hell-fury of grief and recriminations against Romans, against the Sanhedrin, against the very Creator of the universe. And perhaps against Jesus himself. *Could you not wait with me one hour? you said. Could you not walk one more mile? we said. One more mile and you would have been safely in the desert. You let it happen. You and your Abba.*

Nevertheless, at the first possible moment, alone and in danger, Mary comes into the thundering absence of the one she loves—and by so doing, puts herself where revelation finds her ready to face the sacred moment.

And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after him whom thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt see him or feel him as it may be here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*)

What is loss but the experience of love, after all? If you did not love, there would be no loss. Absence becomes a kind of presence. But during this particular dark hour in this particular place in time, the emptiness becomes *real presence*. This scene of Mary's love piercing the darkness invites you into your own inner being. You are taught to go to the boundary of the soul in the dark to wait with your offering—the

bitter myrrh of tears and grief.

What man or woman or child does not bear grief? Even a happy and healthy childhood has its frustrations, and too often war, hunger, injustice, poverty, disease and natural disaster prevail. What drove Abraham and Moses to plead for their generations? What drove the prophets to pit their lives against their society and culture? And, absorbed as he was in that same tradition of the patriarchs and prophets, what drove Jesus to the cross?

Love. And love and mourning and emptiness and faithfulness drive us to the tomb with our myrrh. Not to expect a miracle, but to witness to a grieving world. To simply be there, in the dark. Thomas Merton, another prophet and master of prayer, describes what happens at this place of darkness: "Love gives an experience, a taste of what we have not seen and are not yet able to see. Faith gives us a full title to this treasure which is ours to possess in the darkness. Love enters the darkness and lays hands upon what is its own!"

What is prayer but this entry into darkness and waiting and sense of loss? And while love impels us toward the dark to begin with, Love meets us there. Maybe not in the brief iconic moment of Mary's Easter morning, but over the oceans and abysses and mountains and deserts of our life through time. Faithful to the unknown and unknowable, Love not only transfigures the lover, but calls her by name: Mary! "I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places that you may know it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name" (Isa. 45:3). She recognizes her beloved in the speaking of her name. And she can respond: Rabboni!

But in this world you cannot cling to love. You cannot hold or hoard it. In a suffering world, there is no time to linger in the sacred moment. Instead, every love must transfigure into ever-widening circles of compassion. This love must go out to the ends of the earth with the message of hope. "What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops" (Matt. 10:27).

The Sforza Hours, a 15th-century image by Giovan Pietro Birago, shows Mary Magdalene ascending into heaven. Clad only in her own hair, illustrating her complete dependence upon God, she leaves behind scenes in which she preached the gospel message of hope. As she is borne aloft by four handsome angels, below her are the oceans, abysses, deserts and mountains where she witnessed to the sacred moment of her encounter with the risen Lord. In the foreground is a rocky

path inviting you and me into the rugged landscape.

Saint Mary Magdalene,
You came with springing tears
To the spring of mercy, Christ . . .
How can I find words to tell
About the burning love with which you sought Him
Weeping at the sepulcher
And wept for Him in your seeking? . . .
For the sweetness of love He shows Himself
Who would not for the bitterness of tears.

—St. Anselm