*RUN, MARY, RUN*

John 20:1-18

Easter, 2022

When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance, what did she do?

She ran!

Mary ran to Simon Peter and to John, the one referred to as “the one whom Jesus loved.” Then the two men ran back to the tomb, with John outrunning Peter. Don’t think of the first Easter morning as a time of calm reflection and meditation. Instead, it was a morning of emotion, intensity and action! Kind of like a marathon.

Soon there will be action on the road between Hopkinton, MA, and Boston. The Boston Marathon is scheduled to be run, involving tens of thousands of runners.

But do you know what happened exactly 50 years ago, on April 1, 1972? That was the day the Boston Marathon allowed women to compete for the first time. Nina Kuscsik emerged from the field to win the women’s race, and all eight of the female runners completed the 26.2 mile course.

The Boston Marathon didn’t have a place for women for 75 years. They were underestimated, ignored, and shut out – one running coach believed the distance was too much for what he called “fragile” women. But then Roberta Gibb became the first woman to run the full Boston Marathon in 1966. She couldn’t get an official race number, so she hid in the bushes and jumped into the race when it began.

Only when the AAU (the Amateur Athletics Union) accepted women into long-distance running did Boston open the race to them. Now, women are running in Boston every year, as well as in marathons around the world.

Just as 1972 was a turning point for female marathoners, Easter morning was a moment of truth for the followers of Jesus. Until then, Mary Magdalene wasn’t mentioned much in the gospel of John. The only clear report is that there were three Marys standing near the cross of Jesus: his mother Mary, “and his mothers sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (Jn. 19:25).

The name Mary a was very common among Jewish women of that time, and John tells a number of stories about still another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

But suddenly, Mary Magdalene slips into the race. Like Roberta Gibb popping out of the bushes, Mary Magdalene makes a dramatic appearance. Early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark, Mary comes out to the tomb. She is the first of the followers of Jesus to make this trip. She arrives before Simon Peter . . . before John . . . before any of the other men. Like a woman training for a marathon, she hits the road early. Run Mary, run!

What Mary sees is that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (20:1). This discovery upsets her, since she assumes that grave robbers have been at work. So she runs to Simon Peter and John, and says to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid him” (v. 2). Notice that she calls Jesus “the Lord,” and she says to them that “*we* do not know where they have laid him.” By calling Jesus “the Lord,” and using the plural “we,” she is identifying herself as part of the community of Jesus’ followers.

Clearly, there were more than 12 disciples, and not all of them were men.

Beth Moore is one of the most effective Bible teachers in the Christian community, especially among women. Her studies are everywhere. I think her home base is a mega-church in Houston, and a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention has said that it would be hard to find a church “where at least some segment of the congregation has not been through at least one Beth Moore study.” I myself have led Beth More- written studies in other churches.

But now Moore has been transformed. “The old way is over,” she says. “The stakes are too high.” She is appalled by sexual misconduct in the worlds of politics and the church. She is adamant that Christian men should always treat women exactly as Jesus did: “always with dignity, always with esteem, never as secondary citizens.” Well, duh. Where’s she been all this time?

Jesus treated Mary Magdalene with dignity and esteem, never as second-class. And this seems to be the attitude of Peter and John as well. The two men take Mary seriously and respond to her by running to the tomb. They run together, but at one point, John pulls ahead and reaches the tomb first. John peers in and sees the linen wrappings, but for one reason or another, does not go in. Peter arrives, enters the tomb, and sees both the wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. Strangely, the cloth is “rolled up in a place by itself” (v. 7 ). That’s a clue that maybe the disappearance of Jesus was not a robbery. What grave-robber would take the time to roll up a cloth and carefully lay it aside?

Then John enters the tomb, and the Gospel says that “he saw and believed” (v. 8). That’s a curious phrase, isn’t it? It leaves us to wonder what it was that he saw and believed. Perhaps he saw that the tomb was empty, and he believed the truth of Mary’s story. That may have been enough for him, for that moment in time. He heard Mary’s story, and he believed her.

Each of us is challenged to believe what our fellow Christians tell us. There are truths that we need to hear, and there are insights and experiences that come to us from people who have been overlooked or ignored. We need to listen and believe when some of us tell us things about the faith . . . even fringe people. Remember that in Luke, the men thought the women’s report was an “idle tale.”

Wake up. Listen. Believe. To John’s credit, he believed what Mary told him. You and I should do the same, throughout the Christian community, no matter which tradition. Test the source, but be open to a transforming perspective, huh?

Now, it is probably true that John did not yet believe that Jesus had conquered death. The Gospel tells us that he and Peter “did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead” (v. 9). At this point, it is enough to see the empty tomb and believe, as Mary said, that he is not there. Then Peter and John return to their homes. They are done running, for now.

But Mary, even though she is weeping, does not drop out of the race. Looking into the tomb, she sees two angels in white, and tells them she is weeping because someone has taken away her Lord. A moment later, she turns, sees a man that she assumes is the gardener, and says to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away (vv. 11-15). For Mary, Easter morning begins not with joy, but with weeping and struggle.

If you are feeling the same way, don’t lose heart. Hang in there, just as Mary did. She is hitting Heartbreak Hill at mile 20 of the marathon. It is natural to struggle with doubt and uncertainty, especially when you are being challenged by something you have never encountered before.

Then Jesus comes to her. “Mary!” he greets her. She turns and says, “Rabboni, which means ‘teacher’. In the middle of her pain and struggle, Jesus comes to her and calls her by name. The very same is true for you and me. Wherever you are on this marathon of faith development, Jesus sees us and recognizes precisely you. All you and I have to do is to respond. Say “yes” to Jesus and let him by your Teacher.

Then Jesus sends her. He says to Mary, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” He is saying to her: Run, Mary, run! So she runs. She runs and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she tells them what Jesus has said to her.

Mary crosses the finish line as the very first apostle, a word which literally means “one who is sent off.” although she had been struggling at mile 20, she flies past the finish line at mile 26.2. carrying forward the message that she has seen the risen Jesus.

Easter is the anniversary of women on a mission, but its significance goes far beyond gender. Easter is an invitation to men and women to run together. Whatever our gender, or nationality, or denominational flavor (or non-denominational flavor), or biblical-learnedness or life-learnedness, you and I are people who are equally recognized by Jesus, and equally sent off to be Jesus’ people in the world.

Wherever you or I am on our personal marathon, know that you do not run alone. Jesus sees you and recognizes you—what makes up your you-ness on this day : Peter, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.

In the midst of your pain or anxiety or confusion or empty or fullness, Jesus calls you by name. And then he sends you off, toward the finish line that lies before you. And you know what? He’s waiting for you there, and he’s alongside you now.

Mary is already on the run. And our challenge today is to follow her. Amen.