

“Run, Mary, Run!”

John 20:1-18

Just as April 17, 1972, was a turning point for female marathon runners, Easter morning was a moment of truth for the followers of Jesus.

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” (John 20:2). 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, Massachusetts, 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 17, 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.

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer registered as K.V. Switzer, not identifying herself as a woman. When she began to run, race officials tried to remove her from the marathon. One of them frightened her, grabbing her shoulders and trying to rip off her bib number. Her boyfriend shoved the man to the ground, and she finished the race in about four hours and 20 minutes.

Only when 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 Mary's standing near the cross of Jesus: his mother Mary, "and Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene" (John 19:25).

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

But suddenly, Mary Magdalene slips into the race. Like Roberta Gibb, popping out of the bushes, or Kathrine Switzer, running as K.V. Switzer, Mary Magdalene makes a dramatic appearance. Early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark, Mary comes 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” (John 20:1). This discovery upsets her, since she assumes that grave robbers have been at work. So, she runs to Simon Peter and to 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.

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 he 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 an interesting phrase, isn’t it? It leaves us to wonder exactly 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.

Wake up. Listen. Believe. To John's credit, he believed what Mary told him. We should do the same, throughout the Christian community.

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. 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 marathon. 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 Boston 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 recognizes her. "Mary!" he says. She turns and says, "Rabbouni!" which means "teacher" (v. 16). In the middle of her pain and struggle, Jesus sees her for who she is. The very same is true for you. Wherever you are on the marathon of your faith development,

Jesus sees you and recognizes you. All you have to do is respond. Say yes to Jesus and let him be your Teacher.

Finally, 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! She goes and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she tells them what Jesus has said to her (vv. 17-18).

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 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, we are people who are equally recognized by Jesus, and equally sent off to be his people in the world.

Wherever you are on your personal marathon, know that you do not run alone. Jesus sees you and recognizes you. In the middle of your pain and confusion, he calls you by name. And then he sends you off, toward the finish line that lies before you.

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

One of our young women, Alexis, a Divinity 6th grader, describes to us how she runs her marathon as she prepares for her father’s – Dan Vegh’s funeral this Saturday...

I had many great memories with my father. We would go bike riding in the metro parks and on the canal, we would go to Adventure Princess camps often over the weekends, and we would go to Steak n’ Shake every Sunday we were together after church. When I heard that he had passed I was in shock and deeply saddened.

I never thought that he would pass while I was still a minor and especially when he was this young. When I heard that he passed, all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry forever. But life must go on, so instead of focusing on the bad parts of life, we focus on the good ones instead.

I remember when he would watch the same YouTube video for days on end and I would get annoyed with him about it. But now that I look back, I realize that those small little arguments are what makes a family. Even if those arguments are about the tiniest things, or the biggest problem. Even if they seem like the worst feeling at the time, we look when we're older and we laugh. We laugh at how stupid both of us were for arguing about something so small.

I remember when he used to play the whistling game with me and my sister. His favorite song to whistle was the theme song of Caillou since it was always the easiest one to guess.

The point is, even though he's not here with us, he still lives within us. Whether that's in our memories or our hearts. Or perhaps a little bit of both.

Alexis quotes from the song "Defying Gravity"... "Families are the compass that guides us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter. Even when they were out of sight and were sad. They still live within us. And eventually, sadness will fly away on the wings of time."

May the peace of God . . .

#375 – Alleluia, Christ Is Arisen