Mary Kay Nashe

In Memoriam

--A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire, Pastor
Grace Lutheran Church, Hartford
Eucharist of the Resurrection -- Burial of the Dead
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Words from the 20th chapter of St. John, the 13th verse:
"Why are you weeping?"

I.

We know why we are weeping.

We have lost a dear friend -- wife, mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, niece, aunt, cousin, traveling companion, coworker, and partner in all kinds of greater and lessor schemes.

We're weeping because we came to depend on her so much. We're weeping because her presence in our midst enriched our lives so deeply.

Those of you who only knew Mary Kay in recent years may be shocked to learn that she always was the way she was. Her mother remembers her at an early age, with either one of two questions preoccupying her at every waking hour. First, when are we going some place? Second, when can we have some people over?

There's an ancient Jewish tradition that attributes wise and pious words to extraordinary infants, just as they were born. So, we are told, Melchizedek stood up in the arms of his midwife and praised the Lord. I imagine Mary Kay standing up in the arms of her OB and asking -- when are we going some place, when can we have some people over?

We're weeping because she presided over our lives so beautifully. She took us places and brought us together.

Her dear husband never knew what hit him, because long before she met him she had already become an accomplished travel agent and provocateur. No wonder she was able to work her magic on him, whom she loved most dearly of all, with such gladsome abandon. No wonder her dear daughter, in turn, the apple of her eye, like no other apple, at an early age herself, just learning how to speak, who had been one evening put to bed at home and who some time later awoke to find herself in a car with her parents going somewhere -- no wonder she asked, "Where is we mommy?" No wonder her dear friend Helen, to whose embrace Mary turned at the very end of her life with such devoted affection, nearly had a nervous breakdown in Morocco one day, when Mary took them both out into the Sahara never worrying that they had next to no gas in the car.

She took us places. She also brought us together. This was true of her family. This was true of her friends. This was true of her coworkers. She was the soul not of respectability, but of

hospitality. No one, as far as I know, ever kept a tally of the dinner parties she hosted during the course of her life, but they were innumerable, and all presided over not only with an abundance of delacies, but also with an abundance of energy, imagination, and grace.

She brought us together, I now realize in retrospect, because -- for her -- each one of us was the most important person in her life. The frantically devoted trip with her daughter to hear Maya Angelou. The joyful but tearful drive back home with her husband, after she and he had safely and successfully dropped off their daughter at college. The whiz-bang trips to see the Celtics in Hartford, with her brothers and her sister-in-law. The long morning walks, when so much got said, with her friends in Harwinton. The sumptuous conversations with her three closest high school confidants, about every fact of life and about many rumors to boot. The caring presence with her coworkers in the office. The selfless trips to be with her mother and her father, especially in the waning months of his life.

Each one of us was the most important person in her life. This is why she could take us places. This is why she could bring us together.

But now she's gone -- and we are weeping.

II.

I invite you, therefore, to ponder the story of another Mary, from the first century, from the lakeside city of Magdelena. She was weeping also.

On the third day after the crucifixion of our Lord, she had come to the tomb where they laid him, early in the morning. It was still dark. She had lost her dearest friend. We have every reason to believe that He had been a man unlike any other man she had ever known. He had compassion for her. He touched her soul, gently. He affirmed her as a person in her own right, whom God loved, just as she was without any plea. He healed her.

But now He was gone. He had been savagely put to death, on a cross. So Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb, as early as possible, while it was still dark, undoubtedly so she could be alone with His body and His memory, undoubtedly so that she could cry her heart out one more time, all by herself.

She saw that the stone had been rolled away. She immediately ran to tell the other disciples. They came, they saw, they went home. She remained. She stood there, alone, weeping outside the tomb.

Then she entered the tomb, where she encountered two angelic figures. She confirmed with her own eyes that the body of her beloved Jesus was no longer there.

Aghast, she must have backed out of the tomb, staring at the empty space, weeping all the more, for fear of the dishonor that might have been visited on His body.

Then a figure approached her from behind. J>he turned around, saw Him, but supposed Him to be the gardner. "Woman," he said to her, "why are you weeping?" She, for her part, assumed that this gardner had had something to do with the disappearance of the body. But no, this was not the gardener. He addressed her by name: "Mary," he said. Then she recognized Him! She responded in Hebrew, His mother tongue and hers: "Rabbouni."

She was obviously overwhelmed! The title she uses for Jesus here is used nowhere else in the New Testament It portrays a powerful intimacy, akin to the intimacy of Jesus' own Hebrew address to the Father, Abba. It also portrays a powerful confidence, not necessarily conscious in Mary's soul at this moment, but highly invested in Jesus nevertheless: a confidence that Eternal Life has here appeared in this world of suffering and death, indeed that Eternal Life has here triumphed over suffering and death, in the person of the risen Lord, once and for all.

So it happened that Mary's tears of bitterness and despair were fashioned into tears of the sweetest joy. That was her story.

III.

Now let me ask you about your story. Let me ask you about your tears -- as you stare blankly into the tomb of this world of suffering and death.

You surely should be permitted to weep, just as Mary Magdalene was. Don't ever listen to anyone who tells you that you don't need to cry. Mary Kay died before her time -- just the way Jesus died before His time. You need to cry. I need to cry. Just the way Mary Magdalene needed to cry.

But I want to raise more than this question for you today -- Why are you weeping? I want to raise your hopes.

I want to reach out to you today and touch you with this promise. When you lift up your tearful eyes from the folded hands in your lap, when you lift up your weary head and look forward to the altar of God, you can see also, as Mary Magdalene s aw.

With the eyes of faith you can see the same figure Whom Mary Magdalene called "Rabbouni." You can see Him beckoning you with open arms to come forward to be fed with the bread of life and the wine of gladness. With the eyes of faith, you can see Him beckoning you to His Table, so that you, too, might taste the joys of eternal life, here and now.

Then, as you commune with Him, you can whisper in your heart of hearts -- Rabbouni, "My Lord and my God."

Then your tears of deep sadness, the bitter medicine of His Cross, can also be tears of great gladness, the healing balm of His Resurrection.

This, I believe, is what our Lord wanted to convey to Mary

Magdalene when he said to her, "Why are you weeping?" This also is what I want to convey to you now. This day, your tears of sadness can also be tears of gladness, as the crucified and risen Lord beckons you to commune with Him.

IV.

When my own day comes to enter into the eternal habitations of the Most High, with all the saints, contemplating the face of the risen Christ, transfigured by His Spirit, I know what I'm going to do -- as soon as I can find some time of my own.

I'm going to seek out my dear sister Mary, and I'm going to thank her with all my heart for today, for doing it all over again for each one of us: for being a travel agent one great and glorious last time, showing us where we're going* and for being a hostess one great and glorious last time, bringing us all together.

Let this latterday Mary be a witness for you, so that your tears of deep sadness can also be tears of great gladness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.