

The People Could Fly – John 20: 1-18

Virginia Hamilton's book "The People Could Fly" tells the wonderful story about a great people who had magical powers. They could fly!

They didn't need machines or airplanes. But with their songs, their inner strength, and their mental capabilities, their spirits would soar, and often their bodies would join their spirits in sailing high above the ground. The people thought nothing of this ability. They thought everybody was like them. They lived with difficulties. They fought nature to survive, and they had enemies... but something so strong inside gave them the power to rise above the situations and circumstances. With the powerful gift of memory they remembered that once upon a time they had the ability to fly.

And here, God is calling us. We need to remember that we were divinely designed by God "to fly", in other words to be bold and strong and rise above harsh and unbearable situations and circumstances.

We are called to remember. Remember that people could fly, be free, independent, courageous and strong... And here comes Mary on the stage... She is not only an Easter woman. She is a person who remembered that she could fly, and helps us to remember that people could fly, that we can fly... That is reason enough to preach her story of rising above the sadness and harshness of everyday life today, and not only at Easter time. Stories of resurrection, of standing up, and carrying on... give us hope and strength, they let us sing and praise, dance and dream...

Mary had been at Jesus' crucifixion. She had stood and watched the lover of her soul die a cruel death. She had been at the funeral, a very small funeral for Jesus attended by three female followers, and a male disciple, and two Gentiles. In a day when the world thought women should be invisible and unheard, should be the responsibility of a man and socially passive, Mary had defied convention. She stood up for what is right and went to places where the others did not dare to go. She was there because she was bold, because she could fly...

Mary Magdalene, the Bible records, had a bad reputation. There is this story of Jesus driving seven devils out of her. Some say Mary had been a prostitute, a woman of the night, a woman without a man, and we have to remember that in those times anyone who didn't live a standard, normal patterned life was labelled "possessed". So whatever life Mary lived, Jesus looked beyond the labels given to her. He risked his reputation to save her from hers.

We don't know what demons Mary had... but let them be doubt, despair, discouragement, defeat, depression, weariness, disbelief, fear and many others... These demons come and stop us from rising and flying. They make sure that we don't remember that "people of faith could fly..."

Jesus loved Mary despite whatever mess she had been in before. He had looked beyond her human faults and seen her essential need for someone to love her with an extravagant love.

Now after his death Mary was searching for the one who had dared to believe in her goodness, her value, and the image of God within her.

Jesus knew that a piece of the divine had been placed in Mary as in every human being since the beginning of time, in you and in me, in all of us.

Mary had found one who loved her genuinely. And she was going to get to him, no matter what that took.

So, early, while it was yet dark, Mary was searching. There was this deep emptiness in her after Jesus' death. She held inside her an incredible longing for him and deep and painful grief and sorrow. It was like there was a hole in her soul. The only one who had loved her and valued her humanness was dead... Her love was lost and gone.

Many people would probably give up, turn around, withdraw, forget... remain silent about the pain. Many say that in bad times they don't want to trouble anyone else...

The lesson Mary teaches us is that it's when things are at their worst that we need to seek... look for Jesus, look for love, hold fast to dreams... While the grief is fresh and the disappointment real, you need to get up and get out! Don't wait, don't delay, don't put it off – walk out and try to fly...

Mary knew that a great stone would block her entrance to the one she sought. But she pressed on anyway. Mary knew she would need some additional help. She knew that her resources were limited. She knew that this was not a job for one woman to do alone. But she was willing to take the journey and to see what she could do once she got there... And then, it had been moved away. We don't know how, but that big obstacle that could have prevented Mary from going there at all, had miraculously disappeared.

Imagine all the stuff we worry about all the time, all the things that hold us back, make us hesitate and not dare to go or act or speak... imagine all these "stones" would be rolled away once we dared to take the first step and walk out... Imagine that the tears, the grief, the anguish over a loss (any loss in life really – the loss of a person, or of an option, or of your freedom, or of your career) faded into the background, and new life came in in surprising ways; who would you be?

Mary didn't know who she would be. She knew only who she had been, one who was lost and out of community. She knew what she had become because of the love of Jesus; she had become a person of hope and possibilities. She knew how something deep within had changed and how peace had come into her life. And she knew that what was, had come to an end on the cross. She had no idea who she would now be. With Jesus absent, who can one be, what can one do, where will one end up? There is no substitute for Jesus... Mary knew that and had to keep moving...

Mary stood there outside the tomb weeping. And as she cried she moved on. Through her tears she could see more than an end, more than paralysis, more than fear and despair. She could see the angels whom the other disciples had missed. As she cried and knelt, she could hear words of comfort that the disciples who had run off had not received. In Mary's greatest distress, God sent an angel... A message of hope... And Mary may have understood that it is God crying with us, and God hurting with us. As Mary cried, help was already there. And the question the angel asked is for each one of us, just as for Mary: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Why are you weeping?

She was looking for Jesus among the dead, but he was not there...

Jesus cannot be found in the dead things... hope, love, self-esteem, joy and happiness which Jesus can bring, cannot be found in dead things or systems or contexts. Jesus can be found as close as we need him. That is Mary's experience. He called her by name. He stood next to her. He stands next to us... and we must have eyes to see him.

Mary thought Jesus was the gardener. This means they were in the Garden of Gethsemane. She had come to the garden alone... And the joy she had found was greater than she expected. In this garden a woman, Mary, was given the power, the authority, and the mandate to go and tell the message of life overcoming death to the world.

Mary may have heard a voice saying: "Remember!"

Mary, remember who you are. Mary, remember who you have become. Mary, remember the potential within you. Mary, remember the message of liberation, freedom and salvation which I have taught. Go back, and remind the others to remember too.

The message of rising beyond one's limited life situation can come when we are open to the voice of him who cannot be found in the world of death. Jesus' resurrection says that in the worst times, there is a message of hope. ...that God still moves stones and allows us to enter places we would not have dreamed of. ...that the light yet shines, and that help is on the way. ...that death, pain and despair do not have the final say.

Jesus' resurrection says that if I hold on, even with my pain, my hurt, and my tears, a word of comfort will come.

Jesus' resurrection says that Jesus healed the sick to show us his power over helplessness. Jesus walked over the water to show us his power over nature. Jesus calmed the raging sea and told the winds to abate to show us his power over every element. Jesus touched the little children to show us his love for the insignificant. Jesus gave messages to the women to show his regard for the nonvalued. Jesus saved a dying thief to show us his compassion for the least and the worst. Jesus breathed out forgiveness to show us the power of healing love. And Jesus rose again to show us that if we remember, simply remember, then we can fly...

Jesus called Mary "Woman" the first time he spoke, and she didn't recognize him. The pain of loss and the confusion of identity caused her not to know her friend. Then Jesus called her by name. "Mary."

There is something about the sound of your own specific name... Now imagine Jesus is calling that name... How will you respond? Will you, like Mary, become the bold and outgoing person he wants you to be?

I pray that some of us will hear Jesus' call and accept the challenge that comes when you are challenged with the thoughts of resurrection... What has God in store for us?

Mary was given a message and a mission: "Go and tell."

How will we go and tell the world about this one who calls us to fly? What will your flying look like?

Will you get involved in making a difference in God's world?

Will you give your time, your talents and your efforts to do something for those in need?

Our children need to hear about our ability to fly.
Our teenagers need to know our and their ability to fly.
All of us need to discover that we can fly.
Every one of us has an assignment. Listen. Rise. And fly!

Jesus said: “Mary, don’t hold onto me.” Jesus sends her out into the world. And he sends us too. Find your peace, your love, your courage, he seems to say, and then reach out into the community.

Mary went to tell the story.
Do we go too?
Go and tell our sisters and brothers...?
“Remember! Remember! The people could fly!”
And, you all, we all, can fly too.

God is waiting for us to use our wings...
Amen.