

## **The Reluctant Pilgrim: The Strangely Familiar**

To begin any pilgrimage, one must leave home. As Moses, there is no way to get from where we are to where we want to be, except as we have the courage to leave that which is familiar, leave that which is comfortable. But most of us are reluctant pilgrims, because it is hard to leave home. Even if the home is painfully abusive, even if the home is empty of love, it is hard to leave.

To begin any spiritual pilgrimage, one must have the courage to leave the safe spaces of the sacred surroundings in which one is sustained. Most of us are reluctant pilgrims when it comes to our spiritual journeys, because even empty plates are less frightening than no plates on the table at all. Familiar words have a ring of truth long after they are empty of any truth at all.

But there is something in each human heart that longs for more than empty words. There is something in each of us that wishes to row out into the mystery if we but have the courage to lay down the pinochle cards in the bottom of the boat. There is something that seeks more. And even if we do not seek to grow, even if we are not yearning to move away towards something greater and something deeper, sometimes home leaves us, and we have no choice. Sometimes we are left alone without the sustaining support of that which is familiar.

Mary lost her home. She had known the home only a short amount of time. It was home with Jesus. We don't know a lot about Mary Magdalene, but we do know that she was not one who was well-respected in her community. She was one who lived on the edge of home most of her life. No one much embraced except for the service of their own passion. No one called her by name, but Jesus did. And in the company of those who walked with Jesus, she found herself. She knew her name. She was loved, and that's what it is to be at home. But home left Mary. Jesus died. Jesus died, down and dirty dead as a criminal, abused and beaten. Her friend, her home died and disappeared into the cave, into a tomb.

When your home dies, you have no choice but relearn your world. You have no choice but to learn how to live again in the absence of that which you have known to be a

sustaining presence. Fundamentally, all grieving amounts to is the process of relearning our world. In the world of rapid change in which we live now, most of us spend our lives trying to catch up, trying to catch up with the world.

I can't tell you how many times I have called my secretary down to my office to say "This computer... This computer, what's wrong with this computer?" And she explains it and goes back to her office, and a week later I call, "What's wrong with this computer?" I cannot keep up. Home keeps disappearing. They keep changing the programs and updating the programs, and I can't find the sermon I wrote just last week.

To live in our world is to learn to grieve, to be in a constant state of relearning how to live. But where do we go to learn how to live? Mary went to a tomb. Mary went looking for the one who named her and who gave her a home. Mary's first place to go was where she believed there was at least the presence, even if it was dead, that knew her. She went to a sacred site.

That's what sacred sites are. They are places that are so profoundly rich with memory, with life, and death, and power, and terror, and love, and passion – so rich with memory that we have to keep going back over and over until the memory speaks its sacred word to us, and until we learn from that place, until we learn from that presence the courage to live again.

Last February I went to New York City to speak, and I had an extra day. I remember walking down Park Avenue. It was a strange sensation to be in the city that I love with the memory of September the 11<sup>th</sup> hanging over me. I walked down the street, and I looked in the faces of police officers, sanitation workers, and secretaries, and executives, and an interesting thing appeared. On the forehead of each of these persons was a black smudge over the eyebrow. It was Ash Wednesday. As I walked back past St. Pat's, I could not help but remember those running, terrorized people bathed in ashes.

And I had to go to Ground Zero. Something seduced me to that site. I had to go. There's something about it. The terror, the power, the courage, the love, the death – there's something about the power of life and death as it merges in cataclysmic ways that draws us back. We go, because we cannot comprehend. That's what a sacred place is. It is a place that is so packed with memory and power, that is it incomprehensible. And we visit, and we visit, and we visit.

In my journey I have discovered that some of us who lost our partners have a lot in common with those who lost their jobs, or lost their partners in divorce, who lost their children, or who lost faith. We have a lot in common, and what we have in common is that we keep going back and trying to figure out what it is in that life before that will inform, and shape us, and help us relearn our world. That's where Mary went – to a tomb.

Worlds fade and disappear. Home evaporates. A wedding party, family and friends, and all of a sudden a human bomb goes off in the midst of the party, and home is gone. A Palestinian mother sits beside the empty bed where her son who blew himself up, and home is gone. We have to relearn our world.

And what happened to Mary we are told by the writer, John, was that she went to the tomb, and when she went, it was still dark. Now John doesn't just drop little geographical and time hints in his Gospel. When he says it is dark, he means something more. He means it is dark. It is dark. So often, spiritual pilgrimages begin in the dark. They begin where we cannot see. They begin where we are confused. They begin where we are unable to assess our own lives and discover our own strength. They begin in the dark.

My pilgrimage began in the dark. When my world came unglued, I didn't know, I didn't understand. I sought the dark. I sought the night. I was awake in the night and wanted to sleep in the day. The day was too bright. It was the night, the music of the night that seduced me. There's something about the night. There's something about the dark when you're scared. There's something about it. It intensifies the fear sometimes.

In the midst of leaving home, the darkness sometimes is intensely black, and we are frightened, but sometimes it is friendly. Sometimes you simply want to let the dark embrace you and hold you, because you don't have to see, you don't have to decide. When it's dark, nobody expects you to do anything.

Mary went to the tomb in the dark, and she stood at the tomb, and she wept. She wept. And there was a friendly stranger nearby who said, "What are you looking for?" *The question when you leave home, "What are you looking for?"*

I remember a friend, after my wife died – some months after my wife died, I was on the road all the time. I was driving, and I was leaving town all the time, and I was disappearing, and my children didn't know where to find me. Finally, a friend who has

the courage to speak honestly with me said, “Moseley, what the hell are you looking for?” I said, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

Most of us when we begin our spiritual journey, it is dark, and we’re not certain what we’re looking for, but we have a hunch. And the hunch bore itself out as time went along, and I have finally decided that Mary and I were looking for the same thing. Mary said, “I’m looking for Jesus. I want to know where they put him.” But when you’re looking for the home that died, what you’re really looking for is yourself. You’re really looking for what it is that disappeared, when that which you loved disappeared, when that on which you counted evaporated. You’re looking for yourself. Every spiritual journey is a journey inward to discover who we are.

But Mary couldn’t see who was asking her the question. She couldn’t see the familiar stranger, because of the tears, because of her pain, because of her fear. She couldn’t see this one who had created home for her, who was there in another way. She couldn’t see. Why is it that we can’t see those who are familiar when we have left home? It is because when we leave home, the first stranger we meet is ourselves. We really don’t know who we are, and therefore, it is extremely difficult to see the other as we once saw them before.

When I left home, I would go to Alabama to see my daughter, Kimberly, and her son, John. And I got anxious when I went to see them. There was an anxiety in me that was not there before. There was a fear, a frustration, and I didn’t know what it was. I thought it might have been the fact that while my wife and I were visiting in Alabama, she had gotten very sick, and it was toward the last of her life. I thought, well maybe, when I go to Alabama, it’s because I remember that experience and the pain.

But then I had a therapist who helped me see that that’s not what it might be. He said, “Your problem may be that you have never been a parent to your daughter without your wife.” All of a sudden, it became clear. I was the stranger, and through these strange eyes, I was looking at my familiar daughter and seeing a stranger. As I thought about it, I realized that she, too, was looking through strange eyes for she had never been a motherless child.

When we leave home, it is hard to see even the familiar, and thus, it is very frightening. But Mary stayed at the tomb. Fascinating piece of the story – it was dark.

The disciples had come, and they had looked. And what did it say about these male disciples? They went home. Some of us men are so anxious to get home that we do not stand around sacred centers very long and weep. But Mary stayed. Mary stayed in that strange place where she felt to be a stranger, and she stayed there before this strange gardener, and she heard him say, “Mary.” She stayed long enough to hear the voice of her home call her name.

Sacred pilgrimages take a long time – a lot of tears, a lot of loneliness, and a lot of fear that comes from that which feels so strange and so unusual. But when we stay long enough, we may just hear our name.

One of the things that you, if you are a parent, know is that you spend a lot of your life as parents trying to protect your children. You don’t want your children to hurt. You try to protect them from some of the severe and painful issues around you. You turn off the television when you see awful things happening to people. You want to protect your children from pain.

And I was that kind of parent. I didn’t like to share the truth about my life with my children, the full truth about my life. One of the interesting things I’ve discovered is my children have always known me better than I thought they did. But on my journey, I got to the point where I had no energy left to protect my children from my pain. I had no energy to keep trying to help them with their lives, and I finally made a telephone call to each of my children, each of my little children, and I said, “Look, I’m exhausted. I’m lost. And I don’t know if I can be of help to you right now. I need you to help me.”

And they did. Each of them in their own way drew upon the resources which were in them, looked through the tear-stained eyes which were theirs, looked at this strange man who was their father. They each in their own way looked at me again, and I heard each of them speak my name. I was still “Daddy,” but now, I am also “Dan.”