

Pictures of God

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

A little girl, six-year-old, was known by her teacher as the one who 'hardly ever paid attention.' One day, though, she became quietly absorbed in a drawing project. The curious teacher approached the girl and asked, "What are you drawing?" She said, "I'm drawing a picture of God." The teacher objected, "But nobody knows what God looks like." The girl, not looking up from her work, said, "They will in a minute."¹

A little girl dared to dispute the notion that nobody knows what God looks like. She would have been in good company with the earliest followers of Jesus, including the author of today's gospel scene, who opened his gospel by telling us that "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (Jn. 1:18) John also wrote three New Testament letters, the first of which begins, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ..." (I John 1:1-2)

Many of the pictures of God in Christ that we are given in the New Testament feature personal witnesses, including Mary Magdalene in today's resurrection account. The very heart of the story stops beating in the moment where we are told that 'Mary stood weeping outside the tomb'. Mary is alone there perhaps in a way you or I might recognize all-aloneness from some of our most devastating moments. Mary appears to have no hope of seeing a picture of good anywhere in sight. But she will in a minute.

In a minute, Mary Magdalene will have a totally revised picture of God. In a minute, she will speak with Jesus, raised from the dead by the power of God. She will see a picture of a God who will not rest until the world's evil and death have been undone.

Mary's new picture of God in Christ's resurrection will no doubt have the place of highest honor in the gallery of Mary's heart. But it might be fair to imagine that Mary already has other pictures of God there. One of those pictures may have been drawn on the day that she heard Jesus say, *'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.'* (John 6:35) Another picture may have formed on another occasion when Jesus said, *'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'* (John 8:12) And yet another picture would have been drawn when Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* (John 10:14,11)

All of these varied images that may have been in Mary's heart make me wonder what kinds of pictures of God you or I might draw if we handed out blank sheets of paper and art supplies. Maybe it would be too much to ask you to draw a picture of God. But maybe it would be fair to ask about some of the most important pictures of ourselves and our lives that are in our hearts, and to wonder how well you or I see the presence or evidence of God in those pictures.

Inquiries like these seemed relevant to a highly successful high school senior whose story comes to my mind. She wrote a college entrance essay on becoming the captain of her school's championship cricket team. When she took the essay to her English teacher for a polish before she sent it off, the teacher didn't recommend a single correction to grammar or thematic integrity or word choices. But the teacher did say, *"Based on this essay, I can't see that you have much real love for cricket."* She blurted out, *"Actually, I hate it! But this is what I've been groomed for all these years."* (How many of us, I wonder, are constrained by those pictures?) After listening some more, the teacher asked, *"I wonder what it would be like if you were to write about something you didn't hate, something you actually felt passionate about."*

A few days later she returned with a story about the month every summer that she spent with her grandfather. He lived in a large rambling place with an astoundingly grand chandelier. Over the years it became a ritual for her to clean the chandelier for her grandfather, one crystal at a time. The project took up a portion of the day every day for a week. She climbed the ladder. Grandpa sat in the chair below. She cleaned. He supervised. And they talked. And talked. And as the chandelier cleaning progressed, the light would shine more and more beautifully, not only through the crystals in the chandelier, but also, as she wrote about it, through her grandfather.

When I look for God in the pictures conjured up by that story, I'm inclined at first to compare the picture of the cricket champion with the picture of the communion between granddaughter and grandfather. But if I step back a little farther, the place I really see God in the story is in the heart of the English teacher. He invited his student to challenge and set aside if need be a false picture of herself, a picture that she'd been meticulously drawing for years. Her teacher, it seems, was inviting her to die to an old life and to rise to something new.

This story of a college essay may seem far removed from and rather ordinary compared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb witnessing Christ resurrected. But what relevance can our Christian faith have unless we can connect the pictures of our own lives to the picture of God that Mary first witnessed?

Making those connections may take a lifetime – but sometimes it only takes a minute. I wonder what new picture of God, what new picture of resurrection, may be waiting for you or for me if we give a minute to the little girl, or to the English teacher, or to the gardener outside the tomb. *Amen.*

¹ TED talk, 'Do schools kill creativity?' Sir Ken Robinson, February 2006.