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Listening to God, Shaped by The Word

This address by New Testament scholar Edith Humphrey, based on 2 Peter 1 and Mary's encounter with the risen Christ, was given at the 2006 conference of AWESOME, a support network for ordained evangelical Anglican women. It offers a relational, Christocentric and Trinitarian understanding of how as we listen together to God's Word in Scripture, we receive light for our path and we ourselves are transformed.

Had Mary been up all night, or was her sleep troubled in the wee hours of the morning by dreams that matched the emotional turmoil of the past few days? The day before had been the first Sabbath that she had spent without the presence of Jesus for a very long time – no doubt it seemed like no Sabbath at all. Her master and healer had released her from the torment of the demonic; perhaps the agony, the void, and the darkness now made her question whether her sanity was impermanent, or whether it even really mattered. There was no rest for Mary and her devastated friends without the one who came to give them rest. Whether completely or only partly sleep deprived, Mary went to the tomb while it was still dark. No doubt the whole thing seemed surreal, the happenings of the past week like a dream from which she wished she could awake. And, indeed, *this was* the pre-dawn not only of Mary's awakening, but the awakening of the whole world. It was dark, but the evangelist tells us it was the first day of the week—that day that would soon become the day of the Lord.

It was dark, but there was the hint of light on the horizon. It was dark, but soon she would be face to face with the One who had the power to pronounce, 'Let there be light'. She arrives at the inexplicably opened tomb – had she, in her grief, mistaken where they had laid him? No, this *is* it: what on earth has happened? In disbelief, she is compelled to enter, and there, in the darker shadows of the cave, she glimpses a vision of two angels. They ask her 'Woman, why are you weeping?' What a bizarre question – why wouldn't she be crying? Then she turns away from the inner darkness, and looks outside towards the world. She sees a figure *standing*, in silhouette against the early morning light; yet she does not know him. Why would she expect to see a slain man standing? Why would she expect to see the dawn after an eternal night? Again comes the question, this time from *him*, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' And yet another question: 'Who are you looking for?'

Our Lord is the consummate teacher. He instructs by startling Mary with his presence, by speaking to her, even in the darkness, by asking us questions. At a

moment when we think that all is over, that there is nothing left to hear, he silences us with astonishment, and teaches us to listen again. Though what he speaks is of cosmic proportions, God speaks his words, addresses his questions, to us. It was this way at the beginning of our dying world: 'Adam, where are you?' 'Woman, what have you done?' (But God asks *no* question of the serpent, since there is nothing left to do but render judgment where that character is concerned.)

Here again on the resurrection morning, at the dawn of a new world, a new creation, the living One engages the one he loves, one of his own, with questions, inviting Mary into his council: 'Who are you looking for?' Mary, however, is intent upon her own programme, and continues in the train of thought that he has sought to interrupt – where is the body? Mary is looking for a body; the risen One invites her to look for a *person*. Her grief prevents her from hearing Jesus' question, and so he calls her *by name*. And as he names her, she knows him – *whom* she is bound up with, and *who he is*. She was looking for a dead man, and is surprised by joy. Here is something for which she was *not* consciously looking: here is the presence of the One who makes all things, including herself, new.

Peter also was there that morning. There is a kind of dance that takes place in those early hours, a dance recorded a little differently in every gospel, as Mary, Peter and the other disciples enter into knowledge concerning the most astonishing chapter of human history – the resurrection of their Lord, and the beginning of the new creation. Isn't it interesting that Peter does not himself see Jesus in that early morning hour, but must (for a time) content himself with the wildly joyful words of Mary Magdalene, the one whom the church calls 'apostle to the apostles'? This is a bit of a surprise, since Peter had been privileged, several months before the ordeal of the crucifixion, to behold Jesus in glory. At that time, the time of the shining Transfiguration, only three – Peter, James and John – had seen the sight, and heard the divine words about Jesus, which they passed on to the others in God's good time. Then, the rest of Jesus' followers had been dependent upon Peter and the inner circle; but on Easter morning, even Peter and the beloved disciple (John?) are dependent on the words of a woman, whom they have difficulty believing.

It is to the women, who stayed at the cross until the end, to those who saw where the body had been laid, that the news of the resurrection is first given. And it is most particularly to Mary that Jesus appears in care and in love. Even the leading disciples must listen to what they, and she, have discovered. These astonishing lines of communication indicate the way of the new creation, the mode of living in the new body of believers that is being forged around Jesus. His followers are interdependent in every way, bound up in an intricate symbiosis, as they come to know the One who gives them life, as they grow into what they are meant to be. The disciples' inter-dependency in 'seeing the Lord' recalls Paul's words regarding the mutuality of the members of the body of Christ, whether head, foot, fingers or lungs, whether male or female: 'In the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman' (1 Cor. 11:11).

Our Light and Word

It seems as though Peter – or perhaps it is one of his pupils, but let's call him 'Peter' – was meditating upon this interdependence, this common vision of the members

of Christ as he recalled the events on Mount Tabor, and all that followed, in the second epistle of Peter. Here he gives his commentary upon the Transfiguration, and emphasizes how it is that we come to understand *together* God's wisdom, God's being and God's life. *Together* we grow in grace, *together* our faith is strengthened, our common love formed, and our hope nurtured:

His divine power has given *us* everything *we* need for our life and godliness through *our* knowledge of him who called *us* by his own glory and goodness....So [all of you—the 'you' is plural!], make every effort to add to your faith goodness, and to goodness, knowledge, and to knowledge, self control; and to self-control, perseverance, and to perseverance, godliness, and to godliness, brotherly [and sisterly!] kindness, and to sibling kindness, love. For if you [together] possess these in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5-8)

It is as we come to know Christ together, as the light from him shines upon us together, that we learn who we are in the church! Notice how the apostle speaks about the gifts of God, and about our growth in Christ, always using 'we' and *plural* 'you' language. The letter emphatically addresses its readers as a group, and depicts their growth towards the character of Christ as something that happens to them *together*. Though it is interesting to note that when the writer issues a warning in verse nine, he gives it to the individual, and thus calls the one who may have 'forgotten' to repent, himself or herself! But the growth in grace is to happen to the whole group together, to the 'we' who are in Christ: Peter addresses his 'brothers' and his 'sisters'. At the same time, the epistle claims a kind of authority for the apostle. Peter is a brother and servant, but also an apostle, upon whose witness the community is dependent. He, along with the other apostles, had seen the majesty of the Lord, and depicts this vision of Jesus as something of utmost importance for the community to recognize. The word of the Lord, the sight of the Lord Jesus, is pictured as a singular light piercing our darkness, enabling us to see: 'We have the prophetic *word* made more sure...as a *lamp* shining in a dark place' (2 Pet. 1:19). *The community of Jesus has a sure word, a lamp that shines*. We are dependent upon each other, but more than that, we are dependent upon those who see better than we do by the light of that lamp.

Our focus is 'listening to God, shaped by the Word'. We all know that good 'words' go far in the formation of a person. The recent film *V is for Vendetta* begins with the lament of Guy Fawkes' sweetheart. She cries out, as she watches him executed, 'you cannot hold or touch an idea'. The movie ends as the main character, V, triumphantly proclaims as he comes to his own death, 'Ideas never die!'. The film actually is quite subtle in enclosing its action in this debate between the hero and a hero's sweetheart, a debate concerning the endurance of ideas or words. For Christians the debate is, it would seem, unnecessary, for the written and human Word of God are conjoined. Sometimes we forget this, and speak only of the Scriptures as God's word, concentrating upon 'Christianity' as simply a set of good ideas. But when Christians speak of God's eternal Word, they are talking about more than good words or an undying idea. They are celebrating the One who is the Word, and who died in love for them, and who rose to live eternally. To be shaped by this

Word is not just to listen to a message from God and allow it to change our mentality. It is to be given life by the One who is the Word, from whom all life and every true word comes. True words, the words of Scripture, the words of Christian proclamation and witness, are important in God's family, because they point to the One who is Himself the Word. The fullest Word that we have is One who can be seen, touched and heard. Indeed, he touches us.

Our Light and Word is Christ

The early disciples knew this, and tended not so much to talk about 'Christianity' as about being 'in Christ'. Peter tells us that the word of the prophets has been *confirmed* by the 'power' and the 'coming' of Christ who is himself the 'prophetic Word', God's word in the flesh to us. Consider his meditation upon the sight at Mount Tabor, and who Jesus is:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Pet. 1:16-19).

The prophets spoke truly, and the eyewitnesses of Jesus, the apostles, spoke even more truly, for they not only heard God's word, they *saw* the One who was the Word, they lived with Him, they were shaped by Him, and they worshipped Him. They came, in the presence of Jesus, to learn that God's Word is a Person, someone who calls us to be *with* him: 'we were *with him*'.

Our walk in Christ is a fascinating thing, for we are dependent one upon the other, but we also are called, particularly, and together as the Church, to be intimate with Christ. For us there are many witnesses, many intercessors, many older brothers and sisters. For us there is also a calling to be directly in communion with the Lord, by the Holy Spirit. When we speak about the apostolic witness, upon which we are dependent, we are not speaking simply about a body of teaching that has been handed down – wonderful though this is! We are not speaking simply about a holy and true history that has won for humanity freedom from sin and death – wonderful though this is! No, the apostles bear witness to the living Word, to the transforming Life, to the intimate Way into the very heart of God. They bear witness to the Lord Jesus, whose delight is to cleanse from sin, but also to call us into life, true life with him.

Peter describes in this letter how it is that he and the others began to be changed, and how it is that we are changed, too. We discover from his words that the transformation occurs when we recognize that Jesus is in the centre. On the mountain, God visited them through sight as well as sound. They were *eyewitnesses* of Jesus' majesty and excellence and they *listened* to what God said concerning Jesus. God's word particularly marks out Jesus, and honours Jesus, who was shining

before them. The words of the Father are the divine counterpart to our words of worship, indeed they are the catalyst for our worship. Peter says that the Father gave honour and glory to Jesus, who has majesty and glory in himself, and said, 'this is my Son; I love him; with him I am well pleased'. In echo, our best worship says, 'this is my Lord; this is my brother, my friend, my teacher; I adore him'. The Father's words teach us how we are to worship!

Peter tells us that the eyewitnesses of Jesus' transformation paid attention to God's words about the Son, the Beloved One, and allowed these words to confirm what they were seeing. They were attentive to this revelation that they had together, for what their eyes had seen was confirmed by the very word of God. The apostles saw, listened, and believed. Peter calls upon those of us who are reading his letter to do the same. There may be many cleverly and artfully designed human stories that would seek to capture or take our attention, but here is God's own word, God's very own revelation, God's very own light in the darkness. Be attentive, listen and heed this, Peter says.

But there is more, it seems. The New Testament doesn't simply speak about attentive listening, followed by submission to the word. (That would be wonderful, in itself, if we were to obey well; but obeisance is not the full dynamic of Christianity, but rather the central idea of Islam, whose very name means 'submission'.) No, Peter says that we have the prophetic Word more fully confirmed, because Jesus the Lord and Christ has been seen and known, and has been honoured by God. Jesus himself is the 'lamp shining in a dark place' – a light who is himself God's promise, whose delight it is to enlighten us at the very centre of our beings, 'in our hearts'. Peter knew what it was to be 'shaped by the Word'. For him the formation began with listening to the Word, but it had to do with coming to know Jesus by means of all the faculties God has given – with the ears, as well as the eyes, the whole body, and the heart.

The Light and Word transforms us

The tenor of Peter's letter gives to us the sense of a document written at the end of a believer's life, as a testimony to Jesus, and as a kind of 'last will and testament', passing on to others what has been learned from Christ. If we read into chapter two, we see that there is some concern for the pernicious effect of greedy and false teachers, and for carelessness among those Christians who are tired of being attentive for the word and work of God. Some, the letter tells us, have even distorted the careful and wise teaching of the Scriptures and of the letters of Paul (3:16), and there is danger that Christians will be carried away by these distortions, or by the brilliant and compelling stories that others are telling about the world. But the letter is not in 'panic mode', because the writer has become assured that the Christian community already has been given 'everything needed for life and godliness'. After all, God has given no mere idea, no remote word, not even a shining vision, but His very self to us! So the apostle knows, at the end of his life's journey, that there may be (perhaps soon for him!) a road *out*, an *exodus* (1:14-15) from this world, but there is equally a way *into* God's presence, an 'entrance into' (1:11) all that God has called him (and us!) to be. He speaks in wonder concerning

the way that God shapes us, how God uses us to minister to each other, and how God calls us *together* to 'participate' in the divine nature!

None of this happens by accident, nor automatically. It is a living process, a growth that comes to us out of the very life of Christ. Coming to know Christ may seem, from one perspective, like a choice that *we* make. Becoming more like Christ might seem, from one perspective, like a whole string of choices against evil and for the truth. But it is, indeed, all of God, who has given us, through his Son, what we need to 'enter'. The letter begins with the prayer that 'grace and peace *be multiplied to you* in the knowledge of God and Jesus' (1:2). Peter then launches into the description of how we should grow in Christian character, adding virtue to virtue. But, at the end of this progressive list, even where it seems that human effort has been stressed, he concludes by saying, 'The entrance, or "way into" the eternal rule of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be *abundantly supplied to you*' (1:11). This abundant supply, this road into the rule of God, has been made available, of course, through Jesus' very own 'exodus' (Luke 9:31) which he accomplished for us on the cross.

Despite the darkness around, despite the need for vigilance and effort, this letter is full of celebration and thanksgiving – without being 'Pollyana-ish'. The apostle is happy that his readers have been established in the truth, but wants also to stir them up, to encourage them to continue to pay attention to the true light, to the majesty of Christ, to the Word of God. He is under no illusion that he himself is *needed*, for he is not himself the light or the way. Yet he knows that God comes to us, speaks to us, is worshipped by us, as we are together, in communion. He had seen God's glory in the presence of other disciples and knows that Christians more easily see the majesty and power of God with each other. So, he tells us of the 'we' who saw the majesty of Jesus, and the glory that was given to Jesus by the Father, a homage heard by the 'we'. Indeed, so important is the 'we' factor that the apostle takes his time to correct those who think that they may individually understand God's will. At 1:20, he insists that one of the basic lessons we must learn is that 'no prophecy of Scripture is self-interpreting', nor does prophecy come about through a single human will. Rather, it is when the Holy Spirit moves within inspired *human beings* (plural) that God speaks by them. And it is by the Holy Spirit that *together* we discern what God has said. Just as the vision of Jesus was not vouchsafed only to one person, so the word of God is not delivered only to one, for God's life is communion. God intends to make us 'communers', 'sharers', 'participants' – with himself, and so with each other; with each other, and so with himself.

Frequently we stop short, not recognizing the full scope of the salvation, the wholeness, into which we have been called. We think most of cleansing from sin, and sometimes about healing from disease. But this letter reminds us that these reparations are not all God has in store for us. 2 Peter declares, astonishingly, that the Father has acted in the Son, Christ, so that, by the Spirit, we might be 'called to his own glory' and become 'partakers of the divine nature'. The same Father, who gave glory to the Son, and who, by the Holy Spirit, enabled the apostles to understand who Jesus was, wants his human children to have that very character

of mutuality that he exhibits with Son and Spirit. Father, Son and Spirit are, The Triune God is, where 'love' finds its beginning, its fullness, and its end – to enjoy each other is what life is all about! This is the mystery of eternity and concerning this mystery *the community of Jesus has a sure word, a lamp that shines*. It is my prayer that as we search the Scriptures, and particularly meditate upon the Transfiguration of Jesus, we will come to understand more and more nuances of this 'sure word' and the many facets of this 'shining light', by which – by *Whom* – we are together being transformed.

Casting away the ancestral curse

Let's return to Mary, alone in the garden with Jesus. We have seen the importance of the 'we' factor in God's Word – that may be true for Peter's letter, but what do we do with the fact that Jesus' word was for Mary herself, alone on that first Easter morning? Surely, if there is anywhere in Scripture that speaks of individual intimacy, it is *here*. (Perhaps some of you, like me, hear an echo of the old gospel song 'I come to the garden *alone*....'). Isn't this story a sign that God's word can be heard and understood by a sole brave woman who would just be tenacious enough not to give up, to continue to look for the truth? No. Mary is one of those exceptions that prove the rule. (There are others, too, like Jacob who wrestled with an unknown stranger until daybreak, and Elijah who in the wilderness complained that he alone was faithful to the Lord God.) Indeed, we know from the other gospel accounts that Mary was *not* alone, but in the company of other women. John's account doesn't mention this, but does speak of her making a second trip to the tomb *with* Simon and the other disciple. Still, John's gospel emphasizes the personal word that Jesus had for this 'Woman', this 'Mary' and tells us how Jesus conversed with Mary alone after the disciples had gone back to their homes. Mary, willing to stay there, daring to be outside her comfort zone, is arrested first by the word of angels, then – joy! – met by the one who is the Word. His word for her is personal, and particular – he calls her name. Yet what he says is not couched in terms of 'individual' or privileged revelation. Jesus calls her attention to his communion with the Father: 'I have not yet ascended to the Father'. (Yes, I know that the full importance of this mysterious statement is difficult to understand, but let's leave the theology of resurrection and ascension aside for now, and simply notice that at the very least he is calling attention to the communion of the Triune God).

How sad that, in trying to rehabilitate Mary, many contemporary scholars focus on what they perceive to be a 'power play' in the New Testament, so that the battle between male and female is perpetuated in the early Church! I suspect that many of you have been asked questions concerning the role of Mary in, for example, the *Da Vinci Code*, or that some of you have been queried regarding the role of Magdalene and the authority of female goddesses in the Gnostic gospels. Most recently, Elaine Pagels and others have appealed to the Gnostic gospels as examples of 'Christian' texts that give women a natural place in ministry. It is true that in some Gnostic texts female names are dominant, but Gnosticism is a varied phenomenon, and some of these texts actually depreciate women and the body, as with the *Gospel of Thomas*. In any case, the genius of Gnosticism is to appeal to human pride, flattering the one who is 'in the know' about spiritual reality, and

giving in to the seductions of specialized and esoteric knowledge. All these speculative mysteries are far removed from the emphasis of our faith, and of the Scriptures, upon the winsomeness of Jesus and his personal gift of himself to us, to the point of death.

Recently, I reviewed an impassioned and sophisticated book by Ann Graham Brock, called *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*. Her thesis is that there are 'many patriarchal tendencies within certain branches of early Christianity and [an attempt] to suppress the significance of women's leadership roles, especially that of Mary Magdalene'. She argues, as she compares the gospels of Luke and John, that Peter is exalted in Luke's gospel at the expense of Mary, who is silenced. Unfortunately, Brock does not notice the many ways in which women take a key role in Luke's work, for she is looking at only one feature. At any rate, the purpose of the gospels is to focus upon what God has done and is doing through Jesus, not to dwell specifically upon the priority of any group, whether apostles or patron-women. Brock misses the beauty, the collegiality, the mutuality of the disciples' fellowship, with all its blemishes, because she is reading the New Testament against its grain, interrogating it in a manner not natural to it. After all, the gospel is not about power plays, or about who is in ascendancy. Paul's embarrassment about these questions of power is an indication to us regarding the true nature of Christ. Remember his humiliation in 2 Corinthians, as he has to plead with his congregation to accept him as their apostle, over against false apostles who are questioning his competency and leading them astray?

So it is that, on the resurrection morning, Jesus does not give to Mary, in the first place, a creed, or a position. No, Jesus calls Mary by name, and blesses her as a member of her spiritual family, and as a follower of himself, the one who has died the humiliating death on the cross. As the morning dawns, he commits Mary to her family: 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God"'. Jesus, the Word, speaks to Mary, and tells her something about his own personhood, bound up with the Father, and about her true life, bound up with the others who love Jesus. She might have thought to 'cling' to Jesus for herself, but the way of love is this: what she has seen and tasted must be given to others.

Mary's personal moment with Jesus, then, confirms what we have heard and seen of God's Word – *together, the community of Jesus has a sure word, a lamp that shines in the darkness*. That light and word is the witness to Jesus, but also God's very gift of himself, by whom we are transformed – and it is he who undoes darkness, who breaks down divisions in this fallen world. It is as though Mary, in the garden, is a New Eve, freed by the risen Jesus to speak a 'good word' to her brothers, a word that is linked with the undoing of the 'ancestral curse' that was enacted at Eden. An ancient hymn of the resurrection speaks of this great joy:

When the women disciples of the Lord
learned from the angel the joyous message of the resurrection;
they cast away the ancestral curse
and elatedly told the apostles:

‘Death is overthrown. Christ God is risen,
granting the world great mercy’.

(Fourth Troparion, *Great Vespers*)

That first garden had been the site of deceiving words, stolen fruit, distorted relationships, death, and broken communion. On Easter morning, the sight, voice and touch of the risen Jesus was the beginning of a new creation, expressed in the speaking of truth, the offer of the bread of life, the mending of relationships, and our growth into an astonishing intimacy with God and with each other. *The community of Jesus has a sure word, a lamp that shines*. He has granted to the world—and to us—great mercy! The mercy of God is Jesus’ presence with us, and the life of the Holy Spirit among us. Let us pray.

Mary Magdalene hastened to the tomb,
And seeing Christ, she questioned Him as though He were the gardener.
O Christ, Great and most Holy Passover of God,
O Wisdom, Word, and Power of God,
Teach us how to listen, and shape us
That we may more perfectly partake of Thee
In the never-ending day of Thy Kingdom.

(From the Ninth Ode of the Canon of Pascha).

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