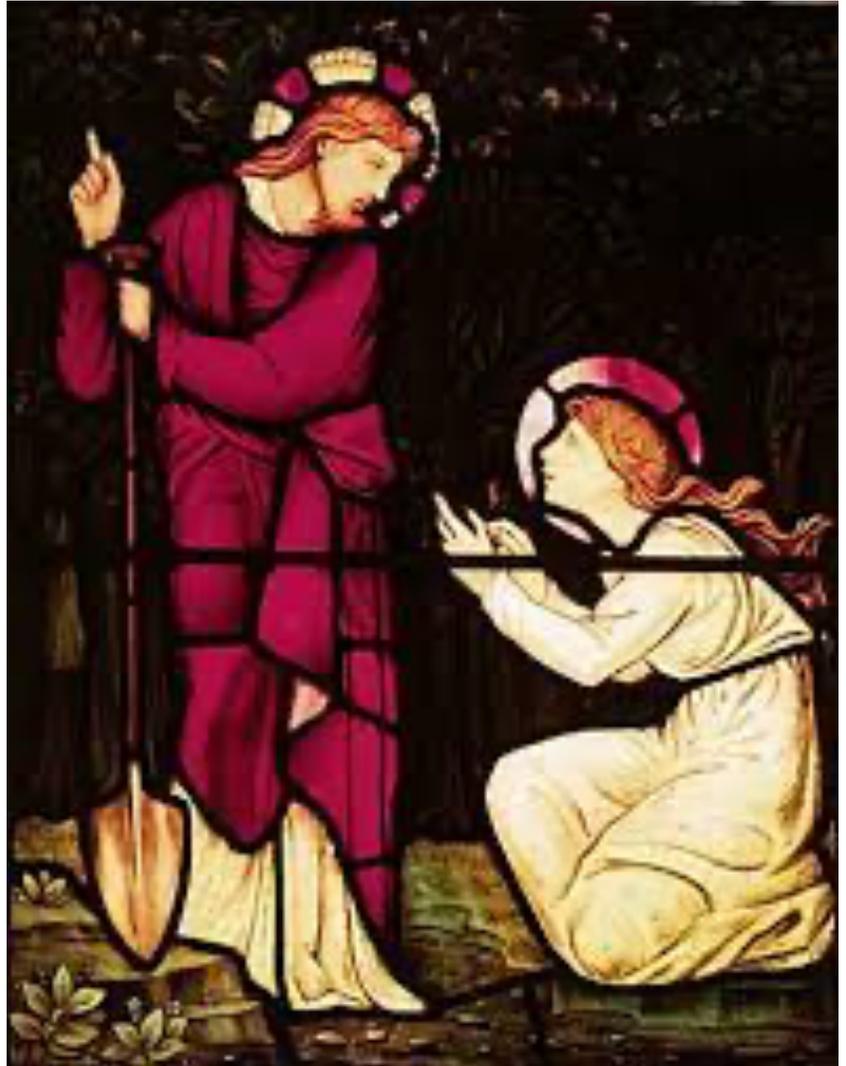


the magdalene and the song of songs

I have two rituals on Easter Sunday morning. My grandfather was from Ireland and he used to take us out to the backyard on Easter morning when we were little kids to watch the sun dance, because he said the sun always dances on Easter morning. So I always climb to the top of our mountain after our pre-dawn vigil to watch the sun dance. (I usually drag some unsuspecting vocation candidate with me as well, as I did this year.)

And the other ritual I have on Easter morning is to listen to Palestrina's setting of the Song of Songs, *Cantico Canticorum*, especially my favorite movements, motet 15 and 16: *Surge propera amica mea*, based on my favorite chapter of the Song, chapter 2: *My beloved speaks and says to me:*

*'Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come ...
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.*



In our tradition we used to read the Song of Songs at Vigils the mornings of the octave of Easter. I remember the first year I was at the Hermitage that I was startled by it, and didn't completely understand why we were listening to it right after Easter--and yet at the same time it made perfect sense to me.

I actually remember the first time I really read the Song of Songs. It was during a summer retreat at the seminary between my first and second year. Dr. Pat Mitchell was my spiritual director for that retreat, and he recommended that I spend time reading the Song of Songs. I was 32 at the time, but obviously a bit immature. I guess I had never really spent time with the book before, but as I started reading it I started snickering to myself and was kind of embarrassed by the whole thing. "It's an erotic love poem! What's it doing in the Bible?!"

I'm told that the rabbis say that all of scripture is holy but that the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. The Jewish people of course consider it to be the love song between the Lord God and the people of the covenant, the Chosen People as the bride, an image that the prophets especially pick up, sometimes in a negative way excoriating the people for being unfaithful to their spouse. In the early church it comes to be seen as the song of the Risen Christ, the bridegroom, and the Church, represented in today's gospel (Jn 20:11-18) by Mary Magdalene in the garden, the new garden of Eden and, as much as we often speak of Mary the Mother of God as the new Eve, in this case it is Mary Magdalene, not only the apostle to the apostles but the new Eve and a symbol of the church as bride.

There is that beautiful line that nearly ends the Book of Revelation: *I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven adorned like a bride.* I learned somewhere that that is one of the most, if not *the* most quoted line of scripture in patristic literature, to show you what an operative image that was.

Later, especially in the medieval monastic tradition, though, it came to be seen as the song of God to the individual soul, a spirituality that would blossom into the bridal mysticism of the Carmelites, for instance, among others. One traditional teaching in the monastic world was that the Book of Proverbs was for beginners, those in the purgative stage and corresponded to a literal meaning of the text; Ecclesiastes was for the more proficient, perhaps those in the illuminative stage, corresponding to the moral reading; but the Song of Songs was for the perfect, those in the unitive stage of spirituality, corresponding to the mystical meaning of the text.

Let Mary Magdalene stand in for us today, when we are wandering in the garden of this world, sometimes searching, bereft, looking for our God, looking for a sign of hope; and perhaps even if we are not wandering but just a little dry and rigid. And listen for the Risen Christ to call us too by name. And remind us that our faith is not first and foremost a set of rituals. Our faith first and foremost is not a fortress of intellectual certainty. Our faith first and foremost is not a cultural inheritance nor imposition. Our faith first and foremost is a *relationship*--a relationship between the Risen Christ and his

body, his bride, the Church. And even more fundamentally a relationship of God with each of us *living stones that make up the living temple of the church*. We are the beloved of God, each of us. And the Risen Christ in the name of God says to each of us:

*Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.*

*The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come ...
let me hear your voice,
let me see your face.
Arise, my love, my fair one.*

cyprian

Tuesday of the Octave of Easter