

GOD MOMENTS

Rev. Patty Farr
Based on John 20:1-18
And Worship Drama: "These Parts"

Easter Sunday - March 23, 2008

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Several years ago I had what you might call a "God moment" ...it didn't come in any spectacular or sensational way - no burning bush, no blinding light, no voice from the heavens - but God came through nevertheless. It was a Sunday evening, and as usual I was rather exhausted from the day's activities at church. Lying on the couch with the TV on, I fell into a deep sleep. Suddenly, I was awakened, almost as if someone had gently nudged me, and some words came wafting into my ear from the television as if from a dream - three words that I will never forget: "Follow your bliss." Still in that sort of twilight zone between sleep and consciousness, I had the sense that the Holy Spirit was conveying these words to me, and that I should pay attention. Now no longer sleepy, I suddenly snapped to attention. Follow your bliss? I liked the sound of that, but what did it mean? As I focused on the television screen, I saw two men sitting across from each other in a study lined with books, animatedly discussing matters of the spirit.

I later came to learn that it was Bill Moyers, the well-known journalist, interviewing Joseph Campbell, an eminent scholar and foremost authority on myths and religion throughout the world. Little did I know then that I was catching a glimpse of what is now considered to be one of the greatest interviews ever recorded in television history. At the point that I woke up, Bill Moyers had apparently just asked Joseph Campbell what was the most important step that we can take on our spiritual journey. And Campbell, grinning, had replied, "Follow your bliss!" The phrase took on a life of its own for me after that. Campbell was suggesting, "Follow your dream, your heart's desire, your passion. Fulfill in your life what you came here to do and to be. Don't get lost in *shoulds* and *oughts*, in obligations and expectations from the outside. Go deep within, and find out what the voice of God is calling you to do, and do it! Follow your bliss!"

That "God moment" came at a very opportune time. That year had been a difficult one for Ron and me. We were living in Massachusetts and raising our two small

daughters and serving a church where we were increasingly unhappy. Then, it seemed as if all hell broke loose – in just a matter of months, my father died unexpectedly, I experienced a miscarriage, and our 1½-year-old daughter Tara was hospitalized with seizures of unknown origin. I was not feeling too blissful, to say the least. But what this “God moment” did for me on that Sunday evening was to gently awaken me from my sleep to a new awareness: God had something more in mind for me than to plod through life as if it were a difficult and burdensome maze of perplexity. God was whispering to me that life is a gift, that every day is a fresh new start. God was inviting me to lighten up. God was asking me to take each experience and challenge in my life and in my ministry and see the beauty...to move from the discouragement of Good Friday to the possibilities and promise of Easter – Easter not just once a year but every single day. This “God moment” helped me transform a difficult period of my life into a time of trust and quiet adventure.

The strange thing is, “God moments” are actually happening to us all the time, but we miss most of them. Are you catching the “God moments” in your own life? They are intensely personal. They will not be the same for everyone. These moments may come through the lyrics of a song on the radio, the whisper of the wind through the trees, the words of a talk show host, the silly antics of a grandchild, the silver glow of the full moon on the snow in the middle of the night. Through such moments, God breaks through with a message just for you.

In the drama we just saw, the Stranger, who is of course Christ, is trying to help each of the other characters to have a “God moment.” These characters don’t yet realize that they are meant to have bigger, brighter, fuller lives than they have so far experienced. Think about these people. They are living in parts, in pieces. That’s why they live in a town called “These Parts.” They are all handicapped, by blindness, by deafness, by arms immobilized in slings. Such handicaps symbolize the ways we are all wounded by life – our wounds often don’t show on the outside as readily as eye patches, ear patches, or arm slings. But we are wounded nevertheless. The question is, do we want to become well? Are we willing to do what it takes to be released from the various forms of bondage that we have allowed to keep us down? Christ comes as an unexpected stranger into our lives to set us free from the shallow, partial lives we are living. He wants to help us become whole.

We seem to live our lives in far too narrow and constricted ways. We seek out security rather than joy; we play it safe rather than live life with carefree abandon. Our hearts are more often fearful, anxious, and barricaded, rather than open, expanding, and brimming with love and daring. Too often we put up with routine, monotonous lives, just trying to squeak by, keeping our nose to the grindstone, meeting our obligations, and just trying to stay out of trouble as best we can. This is not the life God has in mind for us. The message of Easter is the message that the Stranger came to bring to the people in the play, “I came that you may have life, and have it to the full!”

Consider that first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene, standing outside Jesus' tomb in the garden, was about to have a "God moment." Scripture tells us it was still dark. Yes, indeed. Mary was living in the deep darkness of her own personal grief and despair, having lost the one person who meant the most to her in her life. She was, like so many of us, lost and frightened inside. For much of her life, she had felt wounded. She was a *woman*, first of all, and in first century Palestine that made her a second-class citizen. On top of that she had struggled with what at the time was called demon possession, but what we today might identify as some brutal form of mental illness. This affliction made her unclean in the eyes of her culture. But then she had encountered this amazing man, this Jesus, who didn't care what society said about her, and who tenderly healed her and loved her for who she was beneath the labels her culture had given her. Yet now Jesus was dead and gone. And here she was, wandering around in the garden maze outside the tomb, as if dead herself.

Into this lonely garden Christ steps unannounced to offer Mary a "God moment" when she least expects it. The scripture tells us, "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, *but she did not realize that it was Jesus.*" Mary didn't know it was Jesus in the guise of a gardener until he called her by her name. That is what a "God moment" does – it speaks to us so deeply and intimately in our heart of hearts that we feel called by name.

Let me share with you one more "God moment" that came to me in my early 20's. Ron and I were living in Washington D.C. We were almost flat broke, scraping by on two meager salaries and living in a basement apartment. We were trying to sort out the direction of our lives. We had left seminary after one year, not at all sure that we would ever go back. We felt that maybe we weren't cut out to be Christian ministers. We didn't feel as if we would fit in with some of the rigid traditions and structures of the church we had grown up with. At no other time in my life did I feel so lost and in the dark. I truly felt like Mary Magdalene wandering around in a daze outside the garden tomb.

But then something happened. Easter week arrived, and two very elderly sisters who lived in one of the apartments upstairs invited Ron and me to come up and watch a movie with them on television. It was the premier airing of Franco Zeffereilli's epic film, "Jesus of Nazareth." I'll never forget how the four of us sat huddled together in the ladies' tiny living room, sipping iced tea and eating sugar cookies and watching the life of Jesus unfold before our eyes. By the time we had gotten to the crucifixion, all four of us were blown away.

Not knowing one another very well, we each tried in our own way to hide the tears silently coursing down our cheeks. When I dared for a moment to look around at the three other faces in that room I felt something so holy, I wanted to bow down. Here, in this living room, where my husband and I and two sweet elderly sisters had gathered, Christ had quietly entered. It wasn't long before I knew, as did Ron, that we would return to seminary. It just took this unexpected "God moment" to realize how very close God

had been all along, and how carefully God had been guarding my life even when I felt so lost and confused.

How is God making quiet appearances in *your* life these days? How many times has God come in some disguise or another and whispered your name? God always comes close to those of us who have been living in quiet desperation, putting up with our lives, assuming there really is no better way. Christ knows who among us is weeping. Even if we're all dressed up and have smiles on our faces, the Spirit always knows what is going on deep down inside.

God knows the burdens you carry; God knows what sorrows and challenges from the Good Friday world you brought in here with you this Easter morning. And the Spirit of Christ says to you, as he said to Mary, "I'm right here. And I will guide your life every step of the way if you will allow me." That is the message of Easter. Jesus, dressed in a thousand disguises, is still with us, giving us "God moments." What will you do with all those "God moments? Will you let them shape your life?

Let us pray. God, you surprise us with your unexpected appearances in our lives. Disguised as a gardener you spoke Mary's name. How are you speaking our names this morning? Open our eyes that we may recognize you and turn all our Good Fridays into the hope of Easter morning. AMEN.

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