

In our Gospel this morning from John, when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance, what did she do? She ran! Mary ran, she high tailed it to Simon Peter and to John, the one referred to as “the one whom Jesus loved.” Then after hearing her unbelievable testimony, the two men ran back to the tomb, with John outrunning Peter.

Although I’m fairly certain that most of us would rather see Easter as a joyous occasion, or as a time for calm reflection and meditation on the meaning of the empty tomb, we witness that our Lord’s Day of Resurrection was a morning filled with emotion, intensity, and action! With all the running and excitement, you might say it was kind of like a marathon.

Now, in case you aren’t aware, soon there will be action on the road between Hopkinton, Massachusetts, and Boston. The Boston Marathon is scheduled to be run, involving tens of thousands of runners. But do you know what happened exactly 50 years ago, on April 17, 1972? That was the day the Boston Marathon allowed women to compete for the first time. Nina Kuscsik emerged from the field to win the women’s race, and all eight of the female runners completed the 26.2-mile course.

It's hard to imagine that the Boston Marathon didn't have a place for women for 75 years. They were underestimated, ignored and shut out — one running coach believed the distance was too much for what he called “fragile” women. But then Roberta Gibb became the first woman to run the full Boston Marathon in 1966. She couldn't get an official race number, so she hid in the bushes and jumped into the race when it began.

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer registered as K.V. Switzer, not identifying herself as a woman. When she began to run, race officials tried to remove her from the marathon, but her boyfriend fought for her, and she finished the race in about four hours and 20 minutes. Thankfully, once the Amateur Athletics Union accepted

women into long-distance running Boston eventually opened the race to allow them to compete. Now, women are running in Boston every year, as well as in marathons around the world.

Just as 1972 was a turning point for female marathoners, Easter morning was a moment of truth for the followers of Jesus. Until then, Mary Magdalene wasn't mentioned much in the gospel of John. The only clear report is that there were three Marys standing near the cross of Jesus: his mother Mary, "and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."

Apparently, the name Mary was very common among Jewish women of that time, and John tells a number of stories about another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But suddenly, Mary Magdalene slips into the race. Like Roberta Gibb, popping out of the bushes, or Kathrine Switzer, running as K.V. Switzer, Mary Magdalene makes a dramatic appearance. Early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark, Mary comes to the tomb. She is the first of the followers of Jesus to make this trip. She arrives before Simon Peter ... before John ... before any of the other men. Like a woman training for a marathon, she hits the road early. Run, Mary, run!

What Mary sees is that "the stone had been removed from the tomb." This discovery upsets her, since she assumes that grave robbers have been at work. So...she runs to Simon Peter and to John, and says to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Notice that she calls Jesus "the Lord," and she says to them that "we do not know where they have laid him." By calling Jesus "the Lord" and using the plural "we," she is identifying herself as part of the community of Jesus' followers. Clearly, there were more than 12 disciples, and not all of them were men.

Beth Moore is one of the most effective Bible teachers in the Christian community, especially among women. She has spoken at big-name evangelical

churches, and her studies are everywhere. A leader of the Southern Baptist Convention has said that it would be hard to find a church “where at least some segment of the congregation has not been through at least one Beth Moore study.”

But now, Moore has been transformed. “The old way is over,” she says. “The stakes are too high.” She is appalled by sexual misconduct in the worlds of politics and the church. She is adamant that Christian men should always treat women exactly as Jesus did: “always with dignity, always with esteem, never as secondary citizens.

Jesus treated Mary Magdalene with dignity and esteem, never as second-class. And this seems to be the attitude of Peter and John as well. The two men take Mary seriously and respond to her by running to the tomb with her. They run together, but at one point, John pulls ahead and reaches the tomb first. John peers in and sees the linen wrappings, but he does not go in. Peter arrives, enters the tomb, and sees both the wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. Strangely, the cloth is “rolled up in a place by itself.” Perhaps providing the disciples with a clue that maybe the disappearance of Jesus was not a robbery. After all, what grave-robber would take the time to roll up a cloth and carefully lay it aside?

Then John enters the tomb, and the gospel says that “he saw and believed.” That’s a curious phrase, isn’t it? It leaves us to wonder exactly what it was that he saw and believed. Perhaps he saw that the tomb was empty, and he believed the truth of Mary’s story. That may have been enough for him, for that moment in time. He heard Mary’s story, and he believed her.

Each of us is challenged to believe what our fellow Christians tell us. There are truths that we need to hear, and there are insights and experiences that come to us from people who have often been overlooked or ignored. We need to learn to listen to the testimonies of others, especially individuals who have experienced

injustice or oppression in this world due to the power and abuse that runs rampant within our society. You might say that we need to Wake up, we need to listen, we need to learn to believe. After all, to John's credit, he believed what Mary told him. We should do the same, throughout the Christian community.

Now it is most certainly true that John did not yet believe that Jesus had conquered death. The gospel tells us that he and Peter "did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." At this point, it is enough to see the empty tomb and believe. Then Peter and John return to their homes. They are done running, for now.

But Mary, even though she is weeping, does not drop out of the marathon. Looking into the tomb, she sees two angels in white and tells them she is weeping because someone has taken away her Lord. A moment later, she turns, sees a man that she assumes is a gardener, and says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." For Mary, Easter morning begins not with joy, but with weeping and struggle.

Now if for one reason or another you find yourself feeling the same way, don't lose heart. Hang in there, just as Mary did. At that point in the story she is hitting Heartbreak Hill at mile 20 of the Boston Marathon. It is natural to struggle with doubt and uncertainty, especially when you are being challenged by something you have never encountered before.

Aside from the empty tomb, my favorite part of this particular Gospel account is when Jesus recognizes her. "Mary!" he says. She turns and says, "Rabbouni!" which means "teacher." In the middle of her pain and struggle, Jesus sees her for who she is. And I can say with absolute certainty that the very same is true for you. Wherever you are on the marathon of your faith development, Jesus sees you and he recognizes you. All you have to do is respond. Say yes to Jesus and let him be your Rabbi, your Teacher!

Finally, Jesus sends her. He says to Mary, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” He is saying to her: Run, Mary, run! She goes and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she tells them what Jesus has said to her.

This morning Mary crosses the finish line as the very first apostle, a word which literally means “one who is sent off.” Although she had been struggling at mile 20, she flies past mile 26.2, carrying forward the message that she has seen the risen Jesus. Similarly, we too are called to run and tell others that Jesus is alive! After all, as Followers of Christ we believe that Easter is the celebration of our Lord’s Resurrection from the dead, and it is a joyous occasion as we celebrate Jesus’ victory over Sin and Death. But Easter is also an invitation for all of us to run together; men, women, young, and old, gay or straight, black or white. Whatever our gender, whatever our race, whatever our age, whatever our social standing we are people who are equally recognized by Jesus, and equally sent off to be his people in the world.

Wherever you are on your personal marathon, know that you do not run alone. Jesus sees you and he recognizes you. In the middle of your pain and confusion, he calls you by name. And then he sends you off, toward the finish line that lies before you. After all, as we have witnessed in John’s Gospel this morning, Mary is already on the run. And our challenge today and every day of our lives is to follow her, as she followed Christ! Amen.