

By Betsey Beckman

Splash dance

an easter odyssey

If you will, put yourself in my place. Imagine yourself a dancer. As Easter approaches, you are asked to create a dance-drama for the Easter liturgy's Gospel: Mary Magdalene's visit to the tomb. A solo dance.

You and your pastor decide that he will read the narration as you enact the scene. After praying with the scripture passage, you go to the sanctuary to begin crafting the dance and taking in the environment, the space, getting a feel for how you will map out the scene, where the tomb will be, where you will discover the "gardener," etc.

One of the first details you take into account is that the sanctuary is virtually at the same level as the congregation, only one step up. This means the sight lines are very poor; at best, the majority of the people will see only the top half of your body and a few arms waving here and there.

Hmmm. Your mind is clicking, taking notes about the feel of the sanctuary, your senses open. Then you notice the baptismal font, a large wooden trough to the left side of the altar. It stands about three feet high and seven feet long. Around the perimeter of its top rim is a little ledge about six inches wide.

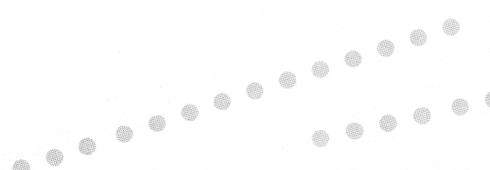
Hmmm. Now, if you could stand up on that ledge, the congregation would have wonderful sight-lines! But stand on the baptismal font? Is this sacrilegious? As you ponder and mull over the possibility, your heart begins to beat faster, and suddenly, it strikes you that the shape of the immersion pool is rather like that of a coffin. All these symbols begin to weave together in your mind. Death. The tomb. Baptism. Water. Going underneath the water, dying, emerging from water, resurrection. Jesus going into the darkness of the tomb, and rising into the light of Easter, the catechumens descending into the primordial womb-pool of Baptism and being born into the new spirit of Christ; Mary Magdalene coming to this font-tomb, poising her body on the edge of life-death, and peering down into the swirling waters to look for Jesus. So, the dance begins to take shape in your mind and body, the central images unfolding.

But there is one thing still not clear: how to express the incredible amazement, shock, surprise, and elation that Mary felt at the sight of Jesus, glowing, loving, full-bodied, and alive! As you put yourself in *her* place and let her feelings move you, an amazing movement image emerges. This one you better check out with the liturgy committee! With their assent, you're on the road to Easter.

This is the process I went through in the pre-Easter season last year at St. Therese's parish in Seattle. Thanks to Fr. David Jaeger, pastor, and Mary Lou Colasurdo, liturgist—who were willing to support me in the most outrageous liturgical dance I've ever done—here's how the piece unfolded.

Easter vigil. The faithful have made the long journey through six readings of salvation history and finally, the Gospel of John is introduced, the alleluia sung and celebrated, the lights of the church brightened. Then, the mood quiets. The air reverberates with tolling gongs and soulful cello from taped background music.

As the assembly is asked to be seated, Mary Magdalene is left standing in the midst of them, garbed in black. Draped over her shoulders, head, and face is a large, sheer, purple scarf, shrouding her in a violet cloak of mourning. As the narration is read, Mary slowly makes her way up the center aisle. She moves with deliberation and heaviness—a turn, a reach, a touch of fear.



As she comes in sight of the tomb, she is stricken. She dashes over to the font, lifts her veil to see if her eyes belie her, and is thrown back in shock. "The stone has been rolled away!" she shouts. Her feet race as her heart does. She hastens up the steps leading to the tomb and peers down into the bubbling waters. "The body of Jesus is gone!"

Now, she cannot move fast enough back to the congregation, which plays the role of the disciples for her. Once there, she announces to them the shock of Jesus' disappearance. Slowly, in despair and hopelessness, she makes her way back to the tomb. With long side tilts, grasping hands and reaches, feet and arms longing for the loved one she has lost now not once, but twice, she grieves by the tomb.

The narrator's voice continues to unfold the story, announcing that Peter and "the other disciple" have also raced to the tomb only to verify Mary's story. Mary is left alone in her grief. Finally, her waves of anguish ebb. She pauses and decides to approach the tomb once again. As she climbs the step to the ledge, she is dazzled by two white figures at either end of the tomb she stands on. They ask her why she is weeping. "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him!" she wails, showing her desperation.

As she turns, her eyes discover another intruder: the gardener. Her desperation turns to indignation. Now her back is to the water, as if to protect this sacred space, and with a long finger pointing out at this stranger, her leg stretches out behind her making one long line of accusation. She shouts: "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him and I will go and remove him!" She collects herself again, arms and legs scooped into her own body, waiting for his reply. Gazing into his eyes, she pauses now only to hear her name in an ancient and familiar voice: "Mary!"

At this, Mary's nightmare disintegrates before her very eyes. She is swept up in recognition, bowled over by the voice of her most intimate Lord and friend. The truth upends her, knocks her off balance and in slow motion, she arches backwards, falling with ease, grace, and dumbfounded astonishment, into the baptismal font behind her. Splash! Her body disappears into the living water, life-giving streams, flooding and filling her body and soul with the miracle of newness.

Now, pause for a moment to imagine the amazement and shock of the congregation. Mouths literally hang open, like empty tombs, gaping wide in disbelief. Deep swift inhales catch in wonder for that breathtaking split-second till wide eyes find Mary's bobbing head reappearing at the water's surface. As she calls out, "Jesus!" the assembly itself breaks out in peals of laughter. This is the surprise and joy of the unexpected Easter that we are all too solemn to hope for, but breaks through into our unassuming lives and splashes us into a new existence, new perspectives, new possibilities.

The waves and whispers of delight continue to ripple through the assembly as Mary jumps out of the pool drenched and dripping, bounding over to Jesus and throwing her wet-weighted arms around him. "Do not cling to me, Mary." She freezes. "But go and find the others and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!"

She pulls back, at first feeling reprimanded. Then, beginning to fathom the power of the commissioning she is receiving, she softens, her heart widening to encompass and carry this great love, and good news. Oh, the time is too short! And here again, all the excitement of the child within her bubbles up in an irrepressible fountain and with a will of their own, her arms fling and wrap around him again, laughing, mischievous, loving. One long, last embrace. Laughs easing into a deep breath of softness and power. This greeting, down through the ages, never to be forgotten. A witness to the astounding truth of lives overturned by love. She moves gently away from him, reluctant and willing. One last

look, and then she is off on her new journey, the town crier announcing the unbelievable.

Mary rushes to the center aisle and begins to unfold the secret. "He is risen. He is risen!" As she moves, her mounting joy uncorks itself and bursts through her singing and waving arms, baptizing the congregation with droplets flying forth from her dripping dress. "He is risen!" The sound of her voice rings as she disappears out the back of the church. The only signs left are the footprints of water all the way down the aisle—birthmarks.

Later, after the baptizing of the catechumens, the entire congregation is asked to come forward and renew their baptismal vows by dipping their own hands, arms, heads (whatever they choose) into the immersion pool. Two volunteers stand with pitchers at the side of the font, dipping and pouring, so that the sounds, sights and feel of water become the backdrop for meditation. As dancer, I return dressed in white, leaping and leading the catechumens back down the aisle, all dried and bright-eyed, to be further welcomed into the communion of the church. Finally, the liturgy is ended, but not without a wash of "Alleluias!" and "Amen!"

So, there you have it, the depths and heights of one wet Easter celebration. Now, put yourself in *your* place. What aspects of this tale spark new possibilities in your own imagination? The power of this story is not just in the specifics of this dance, but in the opening out of our Easter symbols, letting these age-old elements of water and birth speak in new and refreshing ways. Let your own imagination travel with possibilities for your Easter unfolding.

Just one last note. The most challenging part of this dance for me was performing it at three different liturgies: once at Easter Vigil, and two times Sunday morning. That's a lot of dunking. Well, you never know what you'll be called to do in sharing your faith. Don't be surprised if you're called to make waves.

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