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"The Moonlit Path": Reading Marie Howe in Early Motherhood

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“the moonlit path”:
reading Marie Howe in early motherhood

an STM thesis project at Yale Divinity School
by Alice Courtright

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1 Figure 1. Baer, Stella Maria, “Four and a Half Months Postpartum”, painting made from New Mexico and Colorado Dirt, www.stellamariabaer.com. Used with permission of the artist for this thesis only.
to Emily Bakemeter
Lightly stepped a yellow star
To its lofty place,
Loosed the Moon her silver hat
From her lustral face.

—Emily Dickinson²

Can you understand? I didn’t know until they came back
that the images had gone away for so long.

Like shy or frightened animals, slowly they came back.

—Marie Howe³

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I. Preface

If this line is the beginning I might be—
If there is no beginning  ok then
—Marie Howe

In early April, flowers begin to open in our yard: small jonquils by the mailbox and daffodils around the base of the dogwood tree. A few white and purple pansies from last year have seeded in the yard, and I dig them out and pot them. Their roots are very shallow. Out back, my daughter, Margaret, helps me plant viola, delphinium, and zinnia seeds. We fill the terracotta pots with soil from the compost pile. We poke holes in the dirt with our fingers. I hold the small seeds in my hand and Margaret pinches a few and drops them in the hole. We stand back and admire our work. We wonder what will grow.

In her poem, “Magdalene at the Theopoetics Conference”, Marie Howe writes,

Yes, the scholar said, but why ask your students to write these close observations?

What use is it to notice the rusted drainpipe?
The young woman asleep in the library her head resting on her folded arms?

Why should they look inside the petals of the purple tulip to the yellow pollen-coated stamen?

Or under their beds to where the dust has collected?

Motherhood means paying close attention. I watch to see when diapers fill, when garden beds need weeding, when my children need to be held. I delight in my daughters. Margaret has beautiful reddish hair, like my husband, Drew. Beneath her lower lip, she has three almost unnoticeable small bumps on her fair skin. When she was an infant, I used to gaze at them when

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4 Howe, Magdalene: Poems, 96.
she fell asleep in my arms after nursing. On her left thigh, she has three small freckles in a row. She calls them Orion’s Belt.

The work of Marie Howe has given me language for this season of early motherhood. In her poetry, I’ve found an articulation for many parts of my life that have gone unspoken. I often think of her poems as I go about my day. When the seasons change, her lines run through my mind: “everything moving underneath/ half alive half awake// What tunnels through the loam?/ What rises from the sheath of leaves?”

When Drew takes the children for a few hours, I drive to the library to read Howe’s poetry and to write. I walk past the long wall of shelves and put my bag down in a carrel near a window. I set up my computer and my book pile. I send a few messages to Drew about the carpool that’s bringing Margaret home from ballet. After a couple of hours in the carrel, I look out the window and realize that I’ve been alone. It’s been quiet. I’ve been reading and writing without interruption. My nervous system feels calmer, and my breath is less strained. “How quiet the room then,/ when I sat in the white wooden chair.”

Why do I read poetry? I’ve been drawn to it ever since I was a girl. I began writing poetry when I was in grade school, on the long car rides my family took to Vermont on the weekend. Now that I’m a mother and have little time to spare, retaining a relationship to reading and writing poetry reveals its importance to me. Poetry and my spirit are like two fruit trees that have been grafted together. But, I’m not sure if I’ve been grafted onto poetry, or it’s been grafted onto me.

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5 Howe, Magdalene: Poems.
There’s pleasure in the craft of poetry. I love the sounds that words make, and how they fill my mouth with resonance. I enjoy the sounds that words can make together, lilting like a song. There are forms I like to struggle with until I find the right word that also fits a pattern. Other writers, like Emily Dickinson and Doireann Ní Ghriofa, work with language in ways that surprise and humble me. I love thinking of a person sitting at a desk with a pen and a paper. What possibilities can emerge from such a simple set of tools?

Poetry moves me. The French theologian Jacques Maritain wrote about the power of art. Art wields “Intuition and Beauty” he writes. It reaches people “more profoundly and insidiously than any rational proposition, either cogent demonstration or sophistry.”\(^6\) Howe’s poetry does that for me. She writes,

\begin{verbatim}
You know how it is
Something has to put a stick in the spoke
To stop the wheel from spinning
And it occurs to you
What you thought was true is not at all, nope
And you glimpse the scrim through which
you’ve been gazing...
\end{verbatim}

In this short thesis project for my Masters of Sacred Theology, I’ve written two essays of creative non-fiction centered on the poetry of Marie Howe and my experiences of early motherhood. The essays are not analytical. Instead, they’re charged with what I value about reading poetry: giving language to life.

I’ve found motherhood mysterious, beautiful, and challenging in ways I never anticipated. Everyday, it pulls me into a new daily relationship with my body’s capacities and limitations. I used to see my body as a vessel for my mind. But after having my children, I see

\(^6\) Jacques Maritain, “Art for Art’s Sake”, in *The Responsibility of the Artist* (Online Edition from 1951 Lecture Series at Princeton University, accessed [https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart2.htm](https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart2.htm)).

\(^7\) Howe, *Magdalene: Poems*, 81.
my body differently. It’s more fragile and more capable than I’d ever imagined. It’s not separate from who I am. In *I Am My Body*, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel writes,

> What was regarded as…dull, unconscious, material, merely body, sensual, is becoming the object of new reflection and at the same time is being grasped as the subject of such thought. But the revolutionary element is that we are losing the distance from the object which has been inculcated into us and suddenly see ourselves as part of this object, putting an end to any cool lack of involvement.

Though I write in my pieces about my daughters and my husband, I’ve tried to respect their autonomy. I’ve lifted certain elements from our family life and shared them, but I hope I’ve done so in a way that shows them as people having their own experiences. I hope I’ve done the same with Howe’s poetry. Her work has caused many of my own stories to rise, and it’s been my intention to give Howe’s poetry space to breathe on its own. Her work has many layers, and I’ve engaged with only a few of them in this thesis.

In *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, Graham Ward examines the inseparable relationship between “reading and revelation.” He writes, “The world of the text confronts the world of the reader; an experience of transcendence offers the reader possibility for transformation.” Poetry requires slow and thoughtful engagement. A poem invites curiosity and questions. It wants to be part of my thinking and part of my embodied life beyond the page. When I read slowly, poetry becomes part of me. It returns to my thoughts unexpectedly. When I walk alone through the streets of New York City, a line from “Magdalene: The Next Day” appears: “The world that would have gone on without me/ bargained and clattered// and I walked where I wanted, free of the pretense of family now,/ belonging to no one”. Where does that line

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surface from? What does it mean to be thinking between lived experience and remembered verse?

Marie Howe’s work poses many questions that can be investigated in an academic manner. There’s a side of me that wants to locate her poetry within the wider field of embodiment theology. I’m particularly interested in how she describes humans as animals, and I believe she makes a convincing theological argument that the freedom of human “creaturehood” is the fundamental sign of Christian transformation and grace.

But instead of making an academic argument, I want — actually, I would use the word yearn — to share how much her poetry has affected me. I want to honor the stories that brought me to her books, and the stories that rose up out of me when I read her lines — the memories of pain and the promise of hope, which she terms “the moonlit path.” I want to lift up what I think literature is for—a way of connecting with intuition and beauty within the fragmented imaginations and realities of others. I’ve found connecting with Howe’s imagination to be profoundly healing.

Howe’s poetry imagines the lives of women in the gospels whose stories have been largely excluded from the biblical canon. The feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes the levels of that erasure. “But while the stories of Judas and Peter are engraved in the memory of Christians,” she writes, “the story of the woman [who anointed Jesus] is virtually forgotten… Even her name is lost to us. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the Eucharist celebrated another story is told: the story of the apostle who betrayed Jesus. The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a
How can theological work be done when even the names of the subjects we want to study are gone?

Sarah Coakley argues that a feminist reading of the scriptures presents several possibilities. She writes that “the elusiveness of ‘seeing the Lord’ has at times been associated with ‘woman’, ‘femininity’, or the ‘semiotic’.” For Coakley, this historical pattern of associating the resurrection with what cannot be merely seen is an invitation. She writes, “this gendered dimension of the ‘grammar’ of resurrection faith is seemingly intrinsic to our continuing difficulties in expressing the reality of a risen Christ who cannot finally be grasped, but rather ‘seen’ — ‘not with the eye only.’” Feminist spirituality inherently involves working with various senses to interpret limited material. The risen Christ cannot be merely articulated. He has to be felt, experienced, and imagined. It takes imagination to see what might not be fully rendered in the scripture. It takes imagination to see the women there as well.

Howe’s fourth book, Magdalene, tries to imagine what Mary Magdalene’s life might have been like, and how she might experience the contemporary world. The book begs the question: what is known about Mary Magdalene? It’s clear that she can be seen only partially, like many women in the Bible. I think of Hagar and Sarah, and the small glimpses we get into each of their inner worlds: Hagar crying in the desert, Sarah laughing at the thought of God giving her a son in her old age. I think of Mary, Jesus’ mother, and Lydia, companion of Paul. The scriptures render a picture of these women that is less than incomplete: it’s almost non-existent. Last year, the writer Elisa Gonzalez wrote about the tragic death of her younger brother,

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who was murdered in Ohio. She turned to the story about Martha, Lazarus’s sister, who is
grieving his death and pleading with Jesus. There’s so little rendered of Martha in the scripture
that Gonzalez can’t connect her own grief to Martha’s. Only when she sees a painting of the
scene by Caravaggio— with the sisters cradling the head of their brother—does she note, “Here I
find a shred of what I searched for in the biblical text: human love, powerless yet frantically
active.”

Sometimes, the artist’s imagination is the only place where connections to scripture can
be made. Colby Dickinson writes

> The very act of reading about these lives, and of making their stories our stories— the
process of writing oneself into Scripture, if you will— is an act of spiritual translation, and it is
what makes the life of faith a living one.

If Mary Magdalene can only be partially known, then it makes sense that I’ve projected
so much onto her. She can be morphed into almost anything: a symbol of penitence, a symbol of
innuendo, a symbol of patriarchal resistance. She’s like a painting I saw this fall at the Museum
of Modern Art by the Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim. It’s called “Sitting Figure with Folded
Hands.” A woman sits at a table, dressed in blue. Her hands are folded in front of her. Her face is
a blank white orb. Looking at the piece, I can’t decide whether I’m looking through her thoughts,
or seeing my own face like a reflection, or she’s totally obscured behind a white wall of paint.

The fragments that remain of Mary Magdalene lend themselves to imaginative projection.
What were the demons that Jesus cast out of Mary Magdalene? How did she become such a
devoted disciple? The Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggeman reads scripture in terms of
poetry, rather than intellectual propositions. We can’t “see this language,” he notes, as a

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language based on propositions. Rather, Brueggeman writes, we must see scripture as based in a
type of “relational trust.” The medium of poetry invites imagination between the writer
and the sources that inspire her. Howe writes into the stories of biblical women, and lets their
lives write into her own. I found myself doing the same with Howe: I read into her poetry, but
her poetry is also infusing my life.

In Feminist Revision and the Bible, Alicia Suskin Ostriker maps out several ways that
women poets have generally come to interact with the Bible. The poet may be a powerless
daughter viewing scripture as an antagonist or a passionate woman viewing the Bible as a lover.
Or, Ostriker writes, the woman poet may view the Bible as “a poem out of which one makes, of
course, other poems.” In the long poem, “The Seven Devils,” Howe creatively imagines her
own neuroses through the lens of Magdalene’s seven demons. Howe comically begins her list of
issues over and over again, unable to limit it to a simple seven. The poem closes with a powerful
portrait of her mother’s death:

The seventh [devil] was the way my mother looked when she was dying,
the sound she made — her mouth wrenched to the right and cupped open
so as to take in as much air… the gurgling sound, so loud
we had to speak louder to hear each other over it.
And that I couldn’t stop hearing it—
years later—grocery shopping, crossing the street…

No, not the sound—it was her body’s hunger
finally evident—what our mother had hidden all her life.

For months I dreamt of knuckle bones and roots,
the slabs of sidewalk pushed up like crooked teeth by what grew underneath.

The underneath. That was the first devil. It was always with me.
And that I didn’t think you—if I told you—would understand any of this—

15 Walter Brueggemann and Clover Reuter Beal. An On-Going Imagination: A Conversation about Scripture, Faith,
17 Howe, Magdalene, 19-20.
In the Christian tradition, there’s a long history of viewing women’s bodies with suspicion. Mary Magdalene, the closest woman to Jesus besides his mother, is often viewed askance. *What’s lurking underneath all we can’t see about her?* Which may be another way of asking, what’s underneath a woman’s intentions? What’s going on inside a woman’s body?

All her life, Howe’s mother hid *her body’s hunger*. And so, the revealing of the body’s needs in death becomes a frightening thing. No longer able to control her body, her mother gasps for air, emitting the classic “death rattle” that often comes before the final breath. The Magdalene narrator is haunted by this scene. It trails her around on an ordinary day, while she’s running errands and crossing the street. What was real had always been hidden, and its exposure is a shock. To her mother, a woman who bore many children, the body was an antagonist. The body’s hunger was a shameful thing. It had to be controlled, like a dangerous animal.

Howe offers a different kind of embodied reality. The body is not to be repressed, but rather honored for its hunger, embraced, and understood. Howe doesn’t argue this idea. She portrays it through scenes of quiet intimacy.

**Low Tide, Late August**

That last summer when everything was almost always terrible we waded into the bay one late afternoon as the tide had almost finished pulling all the way out

and sat down in the waist-deep water
I floating on his lap facing him, my legs floating around him, and we quietly coupled,

and stayed, loosely joined like that, not moving, but being moved by the softly sucking and lapping water, as the pulling out reached its limit and the tide began to flow slowly back in again.

Some children ran after each other, squealing in the shallows, near but not too near. I rested my chin on his shoulder looking toward the shore. As he must have been looking over my shoulder, to where the water deepened and the small boats tugged on their anchors.¹⁸

In *Magdalene*, embodiment leads to integration. As the poet-persona begins to heal, the conscious mind, which was previously dissociative, lands within the body. There’s a sense of finally being present at the end of the arc of the poetry volume. Yet this embodiment, which is an integration of consciousness and form, isn’t limited to the narrator’s individual self. The “coming home” brings the narrator into communion with women all over the world, with humanity and the landscape itself. In “Magdalene Afterwards” she writes, “I’m sitting on the bench with my bags, waiting for the bus./ I’m the woman in the black suit and heels hailing a taxi./ I’m in prayer, in meditation, I’ve shaved my head, I wear robes/ now instead of dresses.// When I enter the classroom, all the children call out my name all at once.”

Embodiment, for the Magdalene narrator, is the antithesis to the isolation and separation that marks the poems at the beginning of the book. Howe’s poetry has served as an antithetical force to the isolation and separation that has marked my journey as a mother. Her work has brought me into communion with my body, with other women, and with the landscape around me here in the Hudson Valley. I’ve written this thesis during one of the busiest seasons of my life. I’ve written early in the morning and late into the night. I’ve even written parts of this thesis while pushing a stroller! Even now, as I type, my baby is waking up, and I need to step away from my work. I can recognize that in a different time, I’d tend to these words and these pages more carefully. I’m grateful that in the middle of mothering, in the middle of joy and duty, Marie Howe’s poetry has been a treasured companion and guide.

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II. Aubade

The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days. . . . But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did.

— Etty Hillesum²⁰

Often I’m lonely.
Sometimes a joy pours through me so immense.

— Marie Howe²¹

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Before the sun rises, I come downstairs. My husband has already turned on the electric kettle. I open a cupboard and pick out a porcelain mug. The small, sharp knife I use is on the drying rack. I cut a wedge of lemon and squeeze it into my cup. The kettle beeps and I pour the hot water.

The layout of my home is simple. The main floor is essentially one big space: sitting area, kitchen, the cherry table with white legs we bought in New Hampshire. My three daughters like to run around the room, making a large circle, giggling and shrieking. My oldest daughter, Margaret, who is seven now, sets the pace. Her long ginger hair swings as she runs. Lucy follows her closely, holding her stuffed bunny rabbit. Lucy is almost five. And Caroline, who only learned to walk at Thanksgiving, moves as quickly as she can. A bottle of milk dangles from her mouth. The big girls lap her again and again. Our dog skitters along behind them, sliding on the wooden floors.

I take my cup and stand by the tall back window and look out behind our house. This morning, there are no deer nibbling on the compost pile at the edge of our yard. I hold the mug near my face and breathe in the steam. The tart fragrance of the lemon fills my lungs. I hold my breath for a moment and then let it out.

I love this sacred morning time, and I light a candle. Fern and moss, the label reads. The small flame is a comfort. I think of this time as Mary Magdalene’s hours. “Early on the first day of the week,” reads the Gospel of John, “while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed.”

I open the back door and walk outside to see the last stars. The air is warm. There’s no moon tonight, only clouds. The dark shadows in the distance are the low hills that the sun will

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break over. The sky will lighten and show the fields behind our yard where the children play soccer.

I hear the galloping of my dog, and the small metallic clinks of his collar. He pushes his face into my thigh and I stroke his soft head. I see my husband, Drew, walking toward me. We’ve been married for over ten years now, and I’m still drawn to him, still eager to see him. He comes close and stands behind me. He puts his arms around me carefully, without jostling the hot water.

My body has changed since we first met. My belly has risen and fallen three times with life, swelling and then shriveling after my water broke and rushed down my legs and the baby was born. One baby was cut out of me—my finger can trace the thin, purple scar.

Drew rests his hands on my hips for a moment, and I think of all that’s underneath what he can feel—my tissues, my bones, my organs, and my empty womb. There’s no one else inside of me, no strange placenta growing alongside a baby’s body. No one else will live and grow inside of me again. I feel so lonely, knowing that. I think of all the eggs still within me, and all the life I still have yet to live. We look up at the trees high above us, waving their long arms toward the sky. Drew kisses me on the neck and we go back in.

* 

For breakfast, our middle daughter Lucy asks for a fried egg and a bagel. She’s four and a half now, and she likes to help in the kitchen. She drags her gray step stool across the floor and stands on it, next to the stove. Her head comes up to my chest, and her little hands are free to work at the counter. I pass her an egg, and she lightly taps it against the white countertop. It makes a small crunch—and she quickly hands back the egg. I stick my thumbs in the shell and break the egg over the frying pan. We watch the bright yolk drop out and sizzle in the olive oil.
Lucy’s changing a lot right now. She’s taller and her mind is growing. She asks me how to spell words and if I’ll play board games with her. She can make it through a full round of Monopoly Junior. Drew realized last week that we don’t need to remind her to go to the bathroom anymore. She rarely has an accident.

*When did she get so big?* I wonder, handing her a second egg. I’ve been so busy with the baby, keeping her changed and fed, making sure she doesn’t get into the dog food. Domestic life has been very demanding. I’m not sure what I’ve missed, though I’m here all the time.

Lucy passes the egg from hand to hand, waiting until it's time to crack it. I imagine I can feel its smooth, cool surface in her small, careful palms. I take pleasure in watching her. Lucy cups the egg and holds it close to her chest. I put the spatula down and rub her back. She smiles up at me.

* 

I’ve been curious about eggs lately. What are they? What are they made of? I’ve never had chickens, or known anyone well who had a henhouse. I know the basics: every morning, a hen lays one egg. That’s hard for me to fathom. I began ovulating around my thirteenth birthday, and now I’m thirty-five. Every month of those twenty-two years, my body has released an egg. That’s not true, actually. I didn’t ovulate during my three pregnancies, or in the months that followed the births. Taking that into account, I’ve ovulated over 200 times in my life.

Each cycle requires an enormous amount of energy. There are four parts to the cycle: the follicular phase, the ovulation, the luteal phase, and menstruation. Each phase affects my hormones, sleep, appetite, and energy differently. Each phase takes about a week. How does a chicken release a fully-formed egg every single morning?
I’ve been trying to work with my body over the last year or two. I’m not trying to get pregnant again, but I still have cycles of fertility every month. I track my period carefully, and schedule around it. I’m learning what foods go with which phases, and how much sleep I need in each part of the cycle. Even though there’s no baby growing inside me, my womb is hardly empty. It’s a center of biological processes. Eggs and blood are always building up and passing through.

Sometimes, I like to go outside at night and look up at the moon. Its phases also rotate on a monthly cycle. I find that mysterious and beautiful. I’m trying to respect my body, and to understand what it needs. I want to nourish it and accept it. I want to learn about it for my daughters. I wish I knew twenty-two years ago what I know now. I would’ve been so much gentler with myself.

*

Last summer, I took Lucy up to North Salem for their annual strawberry festival. It was just the two of us, driving through the Hudson Valley on a hot July afternoon. We left directly from church and arrived early. Members of the historical society were setting up tables on the grass, and a band was doing a sound check. Lucy climbed up a stone wall and took in the scene. There was a big tent with a great field behind it. The field was on a hill that covered most of the horizon. We wandered up to the tent and rested in the shade. A puppeteer was preparing her show.

We found a trail that cut through the large field. The grass rose high on either side of us. Lucy ran up the slope with one arm extended, her fingers brushing the stalks like strings on a harp. Ahead, the trail seemed to end in sky. The tall grass framed the path and made the blue sky ahead look like a kind of door. It looked like a portal to heaven.
The poet Marie Howe has written a series of poems about the life of Mary, Jesus’ mother.

The second one is called “Once or Twice or Three Times, I Saw Something.”

Once or twice or three times, I saw something
rise from the dust in the yard, like the soul
of the dust, or from the field, the soul-body
of the field—rise and hover like a veil in the sun
billowing—as if I could see the wind itself.
I thought I did it—squinting—but I didn’t.
As if the edges of things blurred—so what was in
bled out, breathed up and mingled: bush and cow
and dust and well: breathed a field I walked through
waist high, as though high grass or water, my fingers
swirling through it—or it through me. I saw it.
It was thing and spirit both: the real
world: evident, invisible.23

*

My life with my children feels like a secret. It’s usually just me with the girls. My family
isn’t close by, and my husband is a minister. We watch him up at the front of the church,
breaking the bread and preaching his sermons. Much of what he does is seen. My life with our
daughters isn’t, except by me and by the God I believe in. Usually, my time with them feels like
a secret I’m very happy to be in on. I’m the witness of their growth. I’m their cultivator. It’s
important to me to make a record of our life together, when I can. We were here, this is what we
did, this is how it felt.

*

We sat in the grass under a large oak tree with bowls of strawberry shortcake and melting
vanilla ice cream, listening to the band playing pleasant, drowsy music. The singer had red
glasses and sang in French. Lucy kicked off her shoes. She wore a lavender headband and a
white eyelet dress with two straps that criss-crossed in the back. I took a photo of her. She

crinkled her face into a smile. The camera caught her freckles and flushed cheeks. It didn’t catch the deep dimple under her left eye.

Nearby, a woman had laid out old, mismatched silver spoons and a carton of eggs on a wooden crate. She had her white hair up in a clip and she showed us the medicinal herb garden behind her and the eggs she’d brought. They were all different. Some were light blue and spotted. Others were cream-colored. Some were very large.

The old woman held an egg upright in her hand and pressed on its top and bottom with just her pointer finger and thumb. I noticed her large knuckles. “See how strong this egg is?” she said. “If you put all your power into pressing on the egg just this way, you can’t break it.”

She showed us the egg and spoon loop: holding an egg in a spoon, try to walk around three croquet wickets without dropping the egg. Lucy picked out a large serving spoon with decorative tendrils on the handle. She held it out in front of her and placed a big speckled egg on it. She took a few steps, and the egg fell out and cracked on the soft grass — *splat*. The woman gave her a second egg, and Lucy held the spoon with two hands now, cradling the bowl that cupped the egg. She finished the loop, and we all clapped.

* 

How could something so fragile also be so strong? There’s a legend in the Eastern Orthodox Church that Mary Magdalene traveled to Rome after Jesus’ ascension, and was received by the emperor. Mary brought an egg to him. She held it out as a symbol of Jesus’ resurrection. The emperor balked. “How could anyone rise from the dead?” he said. “It’s as impossible as that white egg turning red!”

There are many icons of Mary Magdalene holding the egg. In some, she grips it with her whole palm. In others, she looks toward it, astonished. But in the one I found most striking, she’s
holding a white egg between her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes are full of intensity under her red wrap, and with her free hand, she points with one long finger toward the egg. The moment is charged. Did she know it would change color?

My mother paints icons. She gave me one of St. Michael the Archangel for my ordination. I put it in the baby’s room. I like to think he’s looking over her, protecting her with his power while she sleeps. My youngest baby is the one that was cut out of me—Caroline. Every breath she breathes feels like a miracle. Every day with her feels like a blessing.

Mom considers her art a form of living prayer. She sits in silence and says an opening prayer. She takes an egg yolk and mixes it with water. She adds in the pigments, or the gold flecks that she’ll use for the halo. She stirs up the mixture with a special stylus and waits for the liquid to coagulate. I love the way her gold halos come out, and how they catch the light. In the Magdalene icon, her large halo looks like the sun, and the little white egg in her hand like an elongated moon.

Marie Howe has written four volumes of poetry over four decades, and moons appear in each one. Her poems notice the night sky and how the light of the moon isn’t only seen by the viewer, but is itself pouring over the face of the earth. The poet can’t grasp it, but can play with its light:

Sometimes the Moon Sat in the Well at Night

Sometimes the moon sat in the well at night.
And when I stirred it with a stick it broke.
If I kept stirring it swirled like white water, as if water were light, and the stick a wand that made the light follow, then slow into water again, un-wobbling, until the wind moved it.
And I thought of all the moons
floating in the wells and rivers, spilling
over rocks where the water broke: moons
in the sheep water, the chicken water,
or here or there an oar bent it, or a woman
spread out her skirt and let it pool there —
the light I mean, not the moon in a circle, not
the moon itself, but the light that fell from it.24

*

I had a moment, right before I had children, when I stopped relating as much to the men
in the Bible. I started relating to the women. I was a young female minister, and I was longing to
start a family and become a mother. I started realizing that I was having a very different
experience than the men I was working with, and even from my husband. My body had to be
reckoned with in different ways. But my thoughts were invisible. Who could see that they were
dominating my life?

Most biblical women lack story, and perhaps that’s what spoke to me. I could relate to
that. Where was the record of their life and their thoughts? I read the scriptures, and I knew the
women were there, especially Mary, Jesus’ mother, and Mary Magdalene, who was an apostle to
the apostles. But there was so little written about them.

Perhaps that’s why I’m so drawn to Marie Howe’s poetry. She imagines the full lives that
these women might have led. She sees them as girls, wandering through a field swirling with
wind. She imagines why Martha had to prepare a meal, “slamming around the kitchen.” She
gives Martha some thoughts: [Jesus is] “a kind man, Martha is thinking: he doesn’t mean any
harm, but if I don’t do it,/ it won’t get done.”

24 Howe, Kingdom of Ordinary Time, 39.
At night, when the dishes are on the drying rack and Drew goes off to his meeting, I make some mint tea and settle into my chair. I open Howe’s book *Magdalene*. Howe describes it as “the story of a woman finding her own subjectivity.” The opening poem, “Before the Beginning,” is only four questions:

    Before the Beginning

    Was I ever virgin?
    Did someone touch me before I could speak?
    Who had me before I was an I?
    So that I wanted that touch again and again
    Without knowing who or why or from whence it came?²⁵

The girl at the center of poem’s memory began her life as an object to the world, an object to be touched and used and had before she was even awakened to the sound of her own voice. How would she find her own subjectivity?

There’s a painting by the artist Thomas Dodd of a girl floating in water. Her head is above the surface, and her eyes are closed. Her long reddish hair flows in the water, reaching down past her waist. He calls the painting “Emerging.” The water reflects light at the surface and becomes darker as it gets deeper. I can’t see the girl’s feet, but I can imagine being the girl floating in the water, and how it feels to have my feet suspended in liquid.

Growing up, we went swimming in the ocean off the North Carolina coast. I’d float in the salt water, and my body would notice the strong and subtle changes of temperature on my skin. A warm current, or a cold one, could sweep past my knees and feet, while my head bobbed above the surface, and my arms swirled at a different temperature. I found it thrilling to think about what was happening beneath what I could feel at the surface of the ocean. Below me, there

was only darkness. But I knew instinctively that there was an overwhelming depth of life underneath me.

*When did I become aware of my thoughts and my body?* I wonder, reading Howe. I give my daughters baths one at a time and at some point, they grow quiet. They lie down in the water until their ears are covered and only their faces are exposed. They look peaceful, lying there, looking at the ceiling, their feet floating in the shallow water. *What are they aware of?* I think. And, *How can I protect them?*

I love Howe’s poems about motherhood. They honor so much of what I’ve experienced with my children: weariness, delight, change, moments of conversation in the car that seem to really mean something. In “The Girl at 3,” Howe writes, “The girl is in love with the letter M./ M, she says to herself—smiling at the thought of it./ M, she says, out loud.”

Howe watches her daughter smiling, listens to her pronouncing sounds. The poem notices that Mary, in the Annunciation, looks up from her book to listen to the angel. But, Howe writes, “It’s a European invention— the book, the girl, the curtained bed./ Mary couldn’t read, and so…didn’t have a self,/ not as we know it.// *She held these things in her heart.*”

What *does* it mean to have a self? The other day I had to send a headshot in for a church newsletter. All of the pictures I have of me include at least one of my daughters. Everywhere I go, I take them with me. They’re a part of how I document my life now, how I move in the world, how I see myself.

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Last spring, when I was still nursing, I sat in a lecture hall every Monday, listening to my professor. I’d leave the baby home with Drew, but I was often late for class, and didn’t get to pump beforehand. In the middle of the talk, my breasts let down, and milk poured into the cloth pads I had in my bra, saturating them. I miss those moments now that Caroline drinks cow milk. I miss that secret knowledge of connection between my body and hers, even if we weren’t in the same space.

When I was pregnant, my girls came around with me, growing inside my womb. We were so close then, in ways I still don’t understand. Their life and my life, creating one another. My daughters, in utero, already had all the eggs inside of them that they will ever have. So did I, in my mother’s belly.

Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th-century abbess and mystic, wrote extensively about nature. She was fascinated by medicinal herbs and physical and spiritual healing. I love her idea of viriditas, which can be loosely translated as “greening.” Like the grass of the earth, the human body and soul can also “green” and flourish. Hildegard sensed the profound connection between the earth and the human form. “The earth is the mother of all,” she wrote, “for contained in her are the seeds of all.”

My first daughter, Margaret, grew to over ten pounds before being born. At the end, I felt that she had outgrown my body’s capacity. My feet were swollen and long blue veins appeared on my stomach and down my thighs. I wanted to sit on the couch with my legs raised all day.

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long. I could feel the baby’s elbows and knees and head through my stretched skin. If I pressed on her foot, she would push against my hand.

In my mind, I have an image of a baby in the womb, floating in fluid. But Margaret took up so much space in my body. All of my organs were pushed to the side. The membrane between my hand and her foot was actually very thin. She didn’t have much room to float, surrounded by the amniotic sac. Was it very hard to move? Was she longing to get out?

When I think of the Virgin Mary growing Jesus in her womb, I see her covered in long blue robes, making the arduous journey from Egypt. She rides on a donkey to Bethlehem, her womb a swollen fruit. In my mind’s eye, she’s beautiful and full of trustful contentment, unbothered by the donkey’s jolting steps. She births Jesus in a stable without the confusion and fear that I knew when the contractions shook me. I see her in a permanent posture of prayer over the cradle, robed in blue, like the painted figurine in my nativity set.

I love Mother Mary. I love her peace, and I admire it. She gives me strength. When the angel Gabriel approached her, and told her she would bear the Son of God, she said, “Let it be with me according to Thy word.” That’s a prayer I wish I could say and mean.

In her poem, “Mary (Reprise)”, Howe puts it this way, “No Going Back might be the name of that angel—no more reverie.// Let it be done to me, Mary finally said, and that// was the last time, for a long time, that she spoke about the past.”

A tall wooden statue of Mary sits on my front table. It was given to us by my godmother, Emily, on Caroline’s baptism day last May. Mary presses her face against her small son. He rests

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28 Howe, Kingdom of Ordinary Time, 68.
his hand on her heart. Mary’s robes fall from her head down to her feet and her eyes are cast to
the floor. When I look at the statue, I can almost sense the pleasure of the child’s smooth face
against my cheek. I don’t know exactly what I mean when I say this, but when I look at her I can
sense the pleasure of God.

Beautiful Mary—her name means “of the sea” and “bitter” and “beloved.” When I think
of Mother Mary, I think of the ocean and the power of water. I’m walking on the shores of the
North Carolina coast at night, looking up at the stars and out to the far horizon, where the sea
touches the sky. The light of the moon hits the water, and the surface looks like blue folds of
fabric. The depth of the water before me and the immensity of the ocean soothe my spirit. Small
waves lap at my feet.

Mary’s call and her response to God fill me with feeling. I want to open my arms and
face the shining sea, and honor the one who brings forth life and bears God to humankind. I
remember the ancient prayer: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou
among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Jesus, Jesus, the one who walked on water and was nailed to a tree. I have a strong sense
of his presence with me always, and his love. I experience it as a love that will never abandon
me, a love that will be with me until the end, a love that has transformed my life.

In Magdalene, the narrator speaks of her abandonment and her addiction: “Who would
follow that young woman down the narrow hallway?/ Who would call her name until she
turns?”29 I think of how Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene on the morning of his resurrection.

29 Howe, Magdalene: Poems, 32.
She thought he was the gardener. *Mary*, he said, looking at her. And “Mary turned to him, and said in Aramaic, *Rabbouni!* (Which means Teacher).”  

“All that words should do,” wrote Etty Hillesum, “is to lend the silence form and contours.” I love the moments of surprise and recognition in the Gospel of John. Right before Jesus goes to the cross, Mary approaches him. “Mary,” reads the Gospel, “took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

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One Sunday morning, I go to church without a lot of sleep. When I walk up for communion, I imagine that I’m going up to a great breast, to be fed with the spiritual milk that I need to keep going. I walk up to the altar rail and hold out my hands.

When I was serving as a priest, I placed the bread in open palms and tilted the cup into open mouths. But now I spend the first part of Sunday morning in the kitchen of my own house, slathering cream cheese on bagels and holding a smoothie cup up to my little one’s lips. Later, I kneel at the altar railing with my girls. I’m happy to be there. Yet I desperately need to receive—to not only be a mother, but also to be a daughter. My palm is open, and a hand gently places the white bread in it.

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30 John 20:16 (ESV).
31 John 12:3 (ESV).
Early one morning, I finish reading *Magdalene*. I read the last lines of the last poem several times. “Whatever flooded into the world when He died,” writes Howe, “that then/the moonlit path over the un-walkable water.”

Outside the window, a little light is coming up and the sky is a grayish blue. I see the tops of the maple trees silhouetted against the backdrop. The branches are bare of birds and leaves. The shadowy limbs and their offshoots remind me of veins. I remember the beauty of those blue veins—like the Tree of Life—on my chest in those great high days when the milk was running. I still have some of those markings on my body — the dark swollen veins that remain as a sign of what has been offered.

I loved breastfeeding. Even now, writing about it, I’m filled with loss and a desire to be a part of that miraculous flow of life again, to hover over a newborn in my arms, to look up and see my husband hovering over us. I loved the way Drew would stand beside me, bringing me water when my thirst came.

I think of all the thousands of eggs left inside my ovaries. Do they float there? Or are they clustered tight? I think about all the bulbs throbbing underneath the surface of the earth, about to push through the early spring soil. What would it take to bear another life to birth and raise it through infancy? Too much. I feel the lumpy scar tissue in my belly from the cesarean. I know it would be foolish to go again.

What is the moonlit path? I wonder, looking out over the trees. I think of the icon of Mary Magdalene, pointing at the egg like a little moon. The mysteries of life are so bountiful—each small egg a potential. The planet, though overused and worn, is still brimming with fertility as the seasons change. I think about our precious earth, circling its sun inside a galaxy, and the

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moon orbiting us. My mind flies past Saturn and Neptune and their rings and moons to the outer stretches of the Milky Way. I think of the New Mexican artist Stella Maria Baer who paints moons and breasts out of earth pigments she has ground up from the landscape.

I hear footsteps upstairs, and I put down the book of poetry. A small voice is calling down to me. Lucy is standing at the door of her bedroom. My morning time is over.

I’ll climb the stairs and open the door. I’ll roll up the blinds and sit on the floor. Lucy will come into my lap, and my hand will run through her hair. She’ll crinkle her face, and I’ll stroke her cheek with the deep dimple.

“Mommy, Mommy!” calls my daughter. “Can you please come up? I need you right now.” I am coming, I will come to you, I say without speaking, closing my notebook and wrapping it with the band. I blow out the candle. The smell of the forest floor rises with the candle smoke like an offering—the smell of fern and moss. I breathe in the fragrance and prepare myself for the long day ahead. How will I make it through? I remember the prayer of St. Ignatius and ascend the staircase:

You have given all to me. To you Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours. Do with it what you will.
Only, give me your love and your grace.
That is enough for me.
III. Holy Week

This is a female text, composed while folding someone else’s clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow, while my hands perform innumerable chores.

—Doireann Ni Ghriofa\(^\text{33}\)

How many times must it happen before I believe?

—Marie Howe\(^\text{34}\)


\(^{34}\) Howe, *Magdalene: Poems*. 
Behind St. Matthew’s Church, there’s a large cemetery. At its entrance, there’s a newly restored lychgate, built to protect coffins from the rain before burial. It has four wooden posts and a small roof with a cross on top. On Palm Sunday, we gather there to begin our procession. The ushers hand out palm branches for us to wave. My husband, Drew, is one of the parish priests, and he greets us in his vestments. When the service begins, the rector prays and walks into the cemetery, singing, “Hosannah in the Highest!” We follow him under the gate. Soon, the sound of the song is lost, and we walk quietly in groups, catching up with each other. Light gray headstones line our way. Many have been blackened with time. The children run among them.

Where will I be buried? I’m not sure exactly. It sort of depends on when I go. But I do know how I want to be buried. When I was a school chaplain, I did a service for a music teacher who died. He wanted a green burial—no chemicals, no extravagant casket. His body was wrapped in a cloth and placed in a light brown wicker coffin. We held the service next to the grave before he was lowered into the ground. It was a bright, beautiful day. I stood next to his coffin under a small white tent. His wife brought a basket of sunflowers. After the prayers, everyone placed a sunflower on top of the wicker coffin and said goodbye. That’s how I want my burial to go. Though instead of sunflowers, I’d like a basket full of lavender sprigs. Lavender is healing and calming. It’s a scent I love to put on in the morning. I’d love to have its fragrance over me when I’m put in the ground.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, and the churchyard is cold—the wind has a bite. I worry about my daughter, Lucy, who’s refused to wear her coat. There’s color all around us. Yellow and white daffodils bloom in bunches along the old stone walls. The trimmed forsythia bushes are flowering. The magnolia trees haven’t blossomed yet, but their dark pink and white buds have grown in fully. When do their waxy green leaves come in?
The procession turns a corner and begins to file into the church. I follow the crowd, chatting with a dear friend, but inside I feel a sense of dread. I’ve never liked entering Holy Week. It makes me uneasy. It’s very violent. *Soon*, I think, trying to soothe myself, *we’ll be on the other side*. Easter is only a week away. But so much has to happen between now and then: services, meals, death on a cross. The intense yellow of the forsythia around us seems like a portent: it’s going to be stark. I’m going to have to face it.

Why does life have to come from death? The poet Marie Howe was the oldest of nine children. Her younger brother John died from AIDS in the 1980s. They were incredibly close. In her poem, “The Gate,” she writes about the power of his death:

*The Gate*

I had no idea that the gate I would step through

to finally enter this world

would be the space my brother's body made. He was

a little taller than me: a young man

but grown, himself by then,
done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,

rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold

and running water.

This is what you have been waiting for, he used to say to me.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This—holding up my cheese and mustard sandwich.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This, sort of looking around.*

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In the 1940s, a parishioner gave a few dozen acres of woodlands to St. Matthew’s. The land is called the Glebe, and several hiking trails wind through it. The main loop takes me about fifteen minutes, but I like to do it with my three daughters. As a group, we don’t move quickly. The short loop can take us over an hour.

On Tuesday, I carry the baby in the sling from the parking lot and pass the trailhead. The edge of the cemetery is on our left. Over here, some of these graves are not very old. They’re still tended to. Someone has placed fresh purple and yellow pansies next to one.

We walk down the hill to the Chapel-in-the-Woods. My oldest daughters, Margaret and Lucy, run down the gravel path with their arms in the air. I worry about them tripping and cutting their palms, but they don’t fall. They’re sturdier than I think they are. The Chapel is a great room within the forest. The floor is moss, and the walls are tall hemlocks, towering over us. The entrance to the chapel is a simple arbor, made of pine trunks, like a freestanding door. I walk through it.

The aisle leads past the pews and a wooden railing to a stone altar and a tall cross. Little Caroline grows quiet in my sling. The space is majestic and sensitive to sound, and somehow she knows that at only one and a half. I walk up to the altar, where Margaret and Lucy are busy making piles of dry pine needles and moss and lichen on its surface. Above us, the light of the morning sun is splintering through the treetops. A woodpecker hammers its beak against a tree, and the sound resonates around the chapel.

I take a breath and Caroline starts to squirm. The girls are also ready to move on. They begin to circle the large metal bell near the altar. “Can we ring it, Mommy?” they ask. I smile and nod, and they take turns grabbing the rope. The bell clangs and I head back to the trail. The
spell is broken. The girls grab fistfuls of what they’ve left on the altar to drop in the creek and they run down the path, jumping over roots and rocks.

The creek that runs through the Glebe is called Beaver Dam Creek. It’s a part of the Croton River Watershed, which feeds into the Hudson River. At the end of the church school year, the children come here for the annual stream stomp. They wear their rain boots and try to catch small crawfish with mesh nets. They drop sticks and leaves off the old bridge that crosses the creek. I stand around with the parents, trying to keep the small ones from falling in the shallow water. I have a fear of drowning.

Sometimes, when I’m outside with the girls, I want to linger over a view, or close my eyes, but I can’t. Caroline needs a lot of supervision. She holds my hand when she walks, and she’s drawn to water and edges she’s sure to tumble from. Every day, I reach a point of exhaustion.

In her poem, “Waiting at the River,” Marie Howe writes,

> Sometimes, I’m tired of being a mother, weary of holding her in my mind, her words brighter than mine, the light’s movement on the rock. Look, I say, Listen, to what my daughter said. (Tired of being) Reasonable and calm, answering to Mom, and how sweet (the sound) my name in her mouth, her mouth on my name, her mouth is not my mouth, her mind (not my). Her body has too many bites on it (too many) scratched. I’m the post she touches and leaves, and (before she) leaves (I’m) the base she runs to, and pushes off from: transparent home, ignored, rebuilt, undone, restored (all) without her knowing, waiting to catch the shine off her hair as she rounds the (watery) bend in the river, stepping among the stones. I stand up (waving), stretch and stand up, to show her where I am.\(^{36}\)

My doula, Juliet, has three children who are older than mine. She helped me prepare for Caroline’s birth. Even though Caroline became a footling breech at thirty-nine weeks and was

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\(^{36}\) Howe, *Magdalene: Poems*, 68.
born via emergency cesarean, Juliet helped me make sense of it. We’ve remained close. She visited me last week with her teenage son, and I asked her how she kept her spirits up when her kids were little and needed so much. Juliet took my hands in hers and looked at me with kind and understanding eyes. “It’s all devotion to God,” she said. “It’s all service.”

Today, the snowmelt has already gone and the water isn’t too high. Margaret and Lucy jump across the stones together and skip flat rocks against the surface of the stream. Caroline tries to wade in, but the water is cold and I pull her back. I don’t want her feet to get wet. After a cry, she settles down. She finds small sticks at the edge of the forest and walks back to the water’s edge to drop them in. She does this over and over again. The sticks float away. How far will they go? I imagine them pouring out into the Atlantic Ocean, but it’s unlikely they’d ever make it that far. Margaret walks up to the wooden bridge and throws a heavy gray stone in. The water opens around it and swallows the stone. We watch the rock sink to the bottom of the creekbed.

I’ve started thinking about natural water in terms of watersheds, not as individual streams or rivers. On a map, a watershed looks like the branches of a tree or a vascular system. It looks like one entity. The Croton River Watershed is made up of seven rivers, several controlled lakes, and a few reservoirs. Some of it is on public conservation land, but much of it isn’t. The Glebe at St. Matthew’s is a part of this watershed and its borders tell a story. The creek runs through the church property, through private land and a network of horseback riding trails. Trail markers separate one area from another: there are blue blazes going one way and a set of signs that read
“No Trespassing” going another. The church trails have their own metal seal. “St. Matthew’s” they read in elegant blue letters, with an image of a ten-winged dove.

The Croton River Watershed is the main source of drinking water for all of New York City. Many fish, like the bluegill, live in its rivers all year round. Migratory species, like the American eel, use it for a “resting, foraging, and nursery area for their young.”

I rarely think about eels, much less how they migrate or procreate. Do eels attend to their eggs the way birds do, finding a way to keep them warm and incubated under water, or do they abandon them?

I met the artist and naturalist James Prosek in college. When I became a mother, he gave me a copy of his children’s book about eels. Prosek traveled all over the world, trying to understand how they spawned and migrated. No one knew much about their patterns. “Eels,” Prosek writes,

are wondrous in their ability to move. They’re often found in lakes, ponds, and postholes with no visible connection to the sea, leaving the inquisitive shaking their heads. On wet nights, eels are known to cross over land from a pond to a river, or over an obstruction, by the thousands, using each other’s moist bodies as a bridge. Young eels can climb moss-covered vertical walls, forming a braid with their bodies. Farmers in Normandy say that eels will leave rivers on spring nights and find their way to vegetable patches to feed on peas.

I wonder what’s moving at the bottom of the creeks and rivers around me. The watershed of the Croton River feels full of mysteries. How is so much life sustained in such a built up area? How do you care for a watershed when it’s under so many different jurisdictions?

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39 The indigenous people who used to live here, the Wappinger, no longer exist. They were wiped out in the seventeenth century by Dutch traders and disease. I wonder what they would have called this watershed and this holy forest.
On the way home from the Glebe, we pass a great oak tree. The tree is hundreds of years old. It’s called “The Bedford Oak.” It has long thick branches, and I imagine the roots of the old tree, stretching out under the field and the road we drive on. One low limb is supported by a man-made crutch. I don’t know if it was placed there to protect the limb, which is still living, or to prevent the tree from toppling over. The sight of it fills me with hope: it’s a sign that humans still want to protect what is vulnerable and beautiful.

We wave to the tree from our silver car. “Hi, Bedford Oak!” Lucy yells. I remember waving to the tree when my belly barely fit behind the steering wheel. Was it just last summer that I was pregnant? Or was it two years ago? Now, my womb is empty, and the backseat of my car is full of kids. When I lay my hand on my stomach at night, I feel the blood pulsing under my fingertips.

The oak tree is next to a town road, and there’s constant traffic. But suddenly, I feel compelled to bring my daughters near it. I turn the car around and park. I put the baby on my hip. We stand near the stone wall, looking up at the twisting limbs. Why are we here? I don’t really know. I just want my girls to love this kind of ancient beauty. I want them to see it when they close their eyes.

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On Maundy Thursday, I drive back to St. Matthew’s for the children’s service and potluck dinner. I’m always driving this road, back and forth between my house and the church. St. Matthew’s is where we spend our Sundays, where we hike, where Lucy goes to preschool during the week. I don’t tire of it. We pass the village shops, the golf course, the prep school, and the Bedford Oak. My cousin, Claire, is seventeen and visiting from North Carolina. She sits in the front seat where I usually keep the diaper bag. We point everything out to her.
It’s early evening and I look in the rearview mirror at the girls. The setting sun is shining right into Caroline’s eyes. Margaret sees that she’s uncomfortable and holds a large book against the window to block the sun. I feel badly for Margaret, stuck in the middle seat, and also thankful to her. She turned seven last month, and she’s a gentle and responsible girl. She doesn’t get much space in our house to read or to do the more difficult crafts she’s interested in. She doesn’t get much time with me, either. I need to keep up with the chores and the needs of the younger children.

Every few months, I try to make it up to her. In December, I took Margaret down to New York City. I bought her a pretzel on the street and a small lavender purse with a sparkly unicorn on it. We wandered around a museum and watched the ice skaters at Rockefeller Plaza. She was so happy sitting on the train with me, making word searches in my journal and watching the city appear on the horizon. I loved being with her. I loved holding her soft hand and listening to her observations.

In March, I took Margaret to a ballet in Ridgefield. I drove down the winding roads toward Connecticut, and she read her book in the backseat. It was nice to be together. It was quiet. Down the road, a large marsh appeared with hundreds of dead trees in it. Dense stands of cattails covered the marsh. The trees were silhouetted against the blue sky, their bare branches extending upward. Whenever this area flooded, these trees must have drowned at the root. Or perhaps they were diseased. I don’t know. Great Blue Herons make their nests in the tops of these trees every year. I told Margaret to look up.

There were no cars behind us, and I slowed down. We spotted at least three herons, standing tall over their wiry nests. Even from a distance, we could see their long necks and the trailing plumes that grew from their crowns. What does the world look like through their eyes?
The herons stood over their nests, each bird perched on one leg. I can’t imagine having my young in a nest so high above the ground. Raising human children means being constantly concerned about falling. In July, the herons will leave their nests. The hatchlings, at only two months old, must either fly or die.

Many birds don’t get to practice for their first flight. The Welsh writer David Whyte began his career as an oceanographer. He traveled to the Galapagos and wrote about the nesting grounds of the albatross on Hood Island:

Though the albatross is untouchable in its flight once launched into the wind, it has a very hard time actually getting off and away in the air due to its weight and size. It needs either a good breeze to lift it from the chop or a large cliff from which to propel itself. For the young albatross coming to maturity, the only way into the air was over the huge cliff that lay to one side of where they had hatched. Every one of the thousands of albatross chicks had but one chance in their short lives to learn to fly.

It was heart-stopping to watch the rotund birds stagger toward that abyss, slowly pick up speed, and then suddenly stop themselves at the edge, practicing for the fateful launch. I would see them, day after day, lumbering back away from the cliff, their heads swaying purposefully and distinctively from side to side. Some inner evolutionary conviction pushing them into this all-or-nothing leap.⁴⁰

The Maundy Thursday children’s service is held in the children’s chapel. Margaret and Lucy sit up front with Claire and their friends, and Caroline goes up behind the altar to sit with Drew. She climbs onto his lap and looks out over the people. What an interesting way to grow up, I think. I squeeze into a pew with a friend and her family.

After the service and the potluck, we stand around the playground watching the children and talking. There was a school shooting in Nashville this week, and the playground, which is also used by the church preschool, feels very exposed. In a small tree, birdfeeders the children

have made out of pine cones are hanging from colorful pieces of yarn. The pinecones make small circular motions.

Soon, I’ll take the children home, and the night vigil will begin. Someone will be at the church every hour from sunset to sunrise to pray and keep watch until the morning of Good Friday. In her book *Magdalene*, Marie Howe imagines the events of that night, in the garden of Gethsemane before Jesus was handed over to the Roman authorities:

_Magdalene on Gethsemane_

> When he went to the garden the night before  
> *And fell with his face to the ground*  
> what he imagined was not his torture, not his own death  
> That’s what the story says, but that’s not what he told me.  
> He said he saw the others *the countless* in his name  
> raped, burned, lynched, stoned, bombed, beheaded, shot gassed, gutted and raped again.\(^\text{41}\)

After I put the girls to bed, and Claire goes upstairs to work on a science project, I realize I didn’t eat much at the potluck. There are plenty of fresh vegetables in the fridge for a salad, but I don’t want to sink a knife into the flesh of a cucumber or carrot tonight. I’ve had enough violence. I pull out some tortilla chips from the cabinet above the sink and sprinkle shredded cheese on top. I put it in the microwave for thirty seconds and sit alone by the window, eating the chips and melted cheese.

Motherhood is both busy and lonely. Some nights, Drew and I have long conversations, and then we go up to bed together. I curl up in his arms and the night sky spins on its starry axis. Often, though, Drew goes to the gym, or heads to a meeting, or has something for church. I have these hours to myself. I look out the window. Tonight is different—it’s a holy night. How will I

keep vigil? I go upstairs to wash my face and put on my eye cream and get in bed. Drew will be
tired when he gets home and the baby will be up early.

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On the morning of Good Friday, the girls and I are outside gardening. I have a mother’s helper following Caroline around the yard, and I get a lot of weeding done. I give Margaret the clippers, and she goes to over to our forsythia bush. She cuts thirty branches for me to put in vases all over the house. Lucy collects yellow petals from the bush and goes inside to make a collage. There’s no school today, and the service at church is too long and somber for the children.

I go inside to fold the laundry. Every morning, I do a quick load. I throw the clothes in after the girls wake up, and put it in the dryer after breakfast. Otherwise, it builds up, and no one can find what they need. When my mother’s helper is here, I can fold an entire load without being interrupted. I can think. I listen to the service on livestream. When I log on, the rector, John, is in the middle of his sermon. Drew is looking up at him in the pulpit. John tells the story of a man who walks by a church in New York City. “Enjoy your forgiveness,” the sign outside the church says. The man is affronted. He says, “What do I need forgiveness for?”

When the laundry is done, I deliver it to everyone’s rooms. Everything has a place: socks, shorts, the baby’s onesies, cloth tissues, Drew’s workout clothes. I can tell I need to turn over some of the seasonal clothing, but I don’t have time for that. I can keep up with daily meals and laundry, the garden and the kids, and find a little time for writing. But I can’t make the time to do longer projects. The summer will come and one day we’ll want to go swimming. That’s the day I’ll pull out all the bathing suits. I wish I could think ahead, but I feel like I’m on a hamster wheel.

42 John Zahl, Easter Sermon, St. Matthew’s Church in Bedford, NY, April 9, 2023. Accessible online: https://events.locallive.tv/events/105344.
wheel. I can only deal with what’s in front of me. I have my systems and I have to live with them. I do make a small effort: I pull some of the Valentine’s Day clothing from the girls room and walk it downstairs to the basement, leaving it on a shelf.

“Calvary” by Marie Howe:

Someone hanging clothes on a line between buildings,
someone shaking out a rug from an open window
might have heard hammering, one or two blocks away
and thought little or nothing of it.43

In the middle of my chores, I keep remembering it’s Good Friday. When I was in seminary, I would go to long elaborate services. On Good Friday, the sacristans would bring a heavy wooden cross into the center of the chancel. We would walk up one by one and venerate the cross. Some would touch it, some would kneel before it. I always wanted to throw myself on it and weep. But I didn’t. I’d step into the aisle and walk toward the cross. I’d pause before it and kiss it. The chant would resound around the chapel: “We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”

At the Getty Museum in California, there’s a marble sculpture by Auguste Rodin called “Christ and the Magdalene.” Rodin has sculpted the figure of Christ with his arms outstretched on the cross into the hewn rock. Mary Magdalene has draped herself on top of him, clinging to his form. Her grief is total. She shows no restraint.

Often, there’s a large distance between what I feel and how I act. Some days, when my period is coming, and I’m drawn to reflection, I don’t want to leave the house. Every encounter I have feels forced. I feel like I’m wearing a mask. Today, I parent the children and take them to the playground, but inside I’m grieving. “Someone might have heard hammering one or two blocks away,/ and thought little or nothing of it.”

43 Howe, Magdalene: Poems, 47.
Howe’s lines remind me of W.H. Auden’s famous poem “Musee des Beaux Artes”:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.44

Now that I’m older, it’s not hard for me to understand how people can miss out on major events or the pain of other people. There’s so much to be done every day. There’s so much to accomplish. The Christian stories I used to soak in now feel like echoes from another lifetime. The liturgies and chants from my years in ministry play in my mind and give structure to the day. They’ve shaped me well for this season, but I feel a certain estrangement from them. I don’t have time to linger over the scriptures anymore, or go to multiple services a week—I must provide the things my children need: a body to hold them, a smile, nourishing food, time outside.

After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus’ body in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own tomb. The Gospel of Matthew notes that Mary Magdalene was there,

44 W.H. Auden, “Musee des Beaux Artes”, accessed on Emory University’s English Department webpage, [http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html](http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html). Thanks to the poet John Murillo for pointing me to this poem and for our conversation.
sitting opposite the sealed tomb. I often think about her arriving on the morning of Jesus’ resurrection, but I don’t think of her watching Joseph put him *in* the tomb on Good Friday. But she was there, watching her Lord until the end. Her presence emanates feeling and grief. Her Lord is gone, and “everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster.” Mary Magdalene remains, though. She doesn’t turn away.

* 

Holy Saturday.

“What the Silence Says” by Marie Howe:

I know you think you already know but—

Wait

Longer than that.

even longer than that. 45 

* 

On Easter morning, I bring the girls into the church. We walk through the large wooden doors and admire the altar. Dozens of lilies are set up around it. Margaret and Lucy are in matching dresses and white sweaters, carrying their empty Easter baskets for the egg hunt after church. They’ve both refused to wear their church shoes, so they’re in white tights and sneakers. We sit in the box pew together, and soon the church fills.

After the children’s sermon, Drew pulls out his guitar and leads the congregation:

*Mary came a-running,*

*bout the break of day,*

*looking for Lord Jesus —*

*the angel rolled the stone away.*

The church is packed and becomes very warm. It takes a long time for everyone to get
communion. My daughter, Lucy, lies on the floor underneath our pew. “I can’t wait anymore for
the Easter egg hunt!” she cries, kicking her legs in the air. I take her down to the Sunday School
room to get some coloring pages and markers.

When we finally exit the church, the wind feels cool on my face and on my ankles. The
girls run with their baskets to the great field where the egg hunt is. I carry the baby up to the
field. The sky is bright blue, and there are colorful eggs in the grass and tall poles with long
ribbons across the field. The wind blows the ribbons and I put little Caroline down on the grass.
She takes a few unsteady steps and then walks as quickly as she can to a bright green plastic egg
in the grass. She picks it up and pulls it apart. Jellybeans fall into the grass. Caroline sits down
and plays with the egg, closing and opening it, and looking up at me. One of the middle
schoolers walks over. She often holds Caroline for me after coffee hour on Sundays. Caroline
lifts her arms up and the girl picks her up.

I wander through the field, looking out for my girls and greeting members of the church.
One woman has her grandchildren visiting. I go over and admire them. The boy has a basket
overflowing with eggs. I hug the grandmother — she’s smaller than I think she is. She loves
poetry, and we share that. In the parking lot, there’s a long table with an extravagant spread. I
find Lucy at the corner of the table, holding a deviled egg, her face smeared with chocolate
frosting. She’s left her basket somewhere in the field. Before we leave, I walk around the field to
find the basket—it’s on the roots of a tall pine tree. I pick up the basket and look back at the
congregation. Cars are leaving, and I see Drew in his vestments, walking with the ushers and
preparing to go to the next service. A few children are lingering in the grass, looking for the last
eggs.
I lean back against the tree for a moment and breathe. The creek is running through the forest, just past the field and down the trail. I think of the water pouring over the rocks, and the great watershed that surrounds us. I’m alone for a moment, but I feel held. I know I’m part of something bigger than myself. The wind picks up and I wrap my jacket around me and head back to my girls. The next thing is to go home and put Caroline down for her nap. I get the girls into the backseat and buckle their seatbelts. We join the line of cars leaving the church. Lucy and Margaret chatter. In the rearview mirror, I watch Caroline in her car seat. She looks dazed.

The church entrance is marked by a stone wall on either side of the road. We drive through it, and turn left to head back to our house. Along the road, the trees are covered in delicate lime green buds. We pass the Bedford Oak, and I look in the rearview mirror again. The baby’s eyes are closing. She’ll be asleep before we get home.
Bibliography


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