

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to the women as they were heading to carry the message of his rising to the other disciples. The angel also said those words to Mary Magdalene and Mary when they felt the earthquake under their feet. The angel descended and rolled back the stone, and the guards lost it. “Do not be afraid,” the angel said to the two women. “Do not be afraid” was also said to Mary when the angel Gabriel announced that she would give birth to Jesus and to the shepherds in the fields as they headed toward the manger.

I wonder how frightened they were when Mary Magdalene and Mary discovered that Jesus was not there. There was a great sense of urgency for them to go and tell the others. They left to carry the message to the other disciples in fear and in great joy and in great haste.

Those two women were most likely heading to anoint Jesus’ body with burial spices; although Matthew’s text doesn’t tell us that.

Janet McKenzie is a contemporary American artist who has committed her life and art to celebrating women’s lives and gifts. At the turn of the 21st century the *National Catholic Reporter* created a Jesus 2000 international competition. McKenzie was the winner of that competition with her offering entitled “Jesus of the People.” She lives in what she calls “the Northern Kingdom of Vermont.” She has created a number of works that are haunting and provocative with dark-skinned

characters that we so often see as white-skinned depicted by traditional artists through the centuries. She has one called *In the Garden of Blessings* that shows the two women named in Matthew's gospel story.

This work shows both women with their eyes closed. It's not clear whether they are headed toward the tomb or coming away from it. They each have lilies in their hands. The woman of darkest skin carries a stone. A reflection on the painting asks a question about the stone. The women may have been wondering who would roll away the stone. Is this woman carrying a stone of impossibility and despair, finding that Jesus is not in the tomb? Another question surfaces as one looks at the painting. Are these two women praying for us "to remove the stone that seals us in impossibilities?"

Christ actually becomes part of the other woman in the painting, for she has a braided crown about her head. "Jesus is no longer in the tomb of long ago or bound within the text. Jesus is in these women. They have become the Body of Christ."

This artist, Janet McKenzie, invites us to enter into Matthew's story where we might "dare to carry resurrection lilies from the grave even when the stone remains." She depicts that our doubts never go away completely, and yet we know this night profoundly that Jesus is not dead. Jesus has risen. Jesus comes alive in us just as Janet McKenzie gives us a window into Mary Magdalene and Mary.

Artists open windows through their creativity, just as writers do with words.

Our Gospel text opens windows into our souls when we hear the story told from beginning to end, like we hear it this night. Sometimes we carry symbols that reflect our very being and how we enter the story. How do we embrace the courage of these two women—Mary Magdalene and Mary? They invite us to tell those around us about the story—the story of resurrection, the story of the stone being rolled away and an angel saying, “Do not be afraid.” The story lives on in us this holy night and as long as we have breath. We’re being handed the baton to carry it forward for them and for Jesus.

I wonder if they’re saying to us, “Do not be afraid.”