

**20** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

## **Trinity Presbyterian Church**

**April 16, 2017**

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### **Easter Sunday**

#### **“Mary Magdalene’s Easter Sermon”**

It had started out as a typical Easter service. Songs bursting from the choir. Loud acclamations that “Christ is risen, indeed!” The typical Easter sermon was preached: God has conquered death. But the holy moment of the service came afterwards, when a woman took hold of a microphone and began to give her testimony. She spoke about trying to raise her four children on a minimum wage income after her husband died. She wept as she recalled the heartbreak of putting her kids to bed hungry. Then her demeanor shifted as she told the story about how it was the church that helped her get back on her feet again—how the risen Christ had presented himself to her. After her testimony, everyone was thinking, “No offense preacher, but that was the sermon.” Testimonies are powerful. So this Easter we listen to Mary Magdalene’s

testimony. We let her story preach the gospel today. And we listen as her experience reveals four truths about what it means to be in the presence of the Resurrection.

Mary's story begins in an odd way: Jesus' resurrection does not occur at the dawn of the day. Instead, it happens in the wee shadows of the morning. "While it was still dark," the bible says. Mary approaches the tomb in the dark, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Trying to focus on the stone that has been rolled away. She stumbles around in the dark as she runs back to tell the other disciples what has happened. The disciples grab their flashlights and have a look around. "Nope he's not here," they say and then they flee the crime scene. But not Mary. No, Mary stays behind to weep next to the tomb in the darkness. Because that is what we do when a loved one has died—we weep, often in the darkness. And I believe this is the first truth that Mary's experience of resurrection teaches us. *Resurrection occurs, "While it is still dark." Inside our pain. Alongside our grief. Always next to some tomb in our life.*

Of course, we may not recognize him. Mary notices a man—a gardener. Might imagine he is tilling the soil of the new creation. He has dirt on his face. He probably still smells from being in the tomb. And amongst all the confusion Mary asks, "Sir, do you know what happened to the body?" The irony, of course, is that this man does know what happened to the body. But the point is: she doesn't recognize him. So it is here that we find ourselves stumbling upon Mary's second truth: *that we can miss resurrection's presence even if it is right in front of us.* Perhaps we miss it because it doesn't make any sense. I mean, what other explanation could there be? A body doesn't just get up and walk out of a tomb! No one is an unbeliever when it comes to death! Or maybe we miss resurrection because of all that gets put in front of us are images of death and despair: poverty, war, violence. And we cry out to God to make resurrection happen in Syria, or North Carolina, or in our own lives. And when our expectation doesn't get met, we miss it. Wasn't it Blaise Pascal who once said, "God created humanity in God's image and then humanity returned the compliment." We have pictured Jesus as a superhero who resurrects the day—he is certainly not a smelly gardener! So in the midst of our collective doubt or depression or expectation we fail to see that resurrection is happening. His presence might be right there in front of us, but we just don't recognize him.

So what does Jesus do? He calls out to Mary by name. "Mary!" And it is here Mary's third truth is unearthed: *We don't find resurrection, resurrection finds us. Calls us by name.* "Mary!" Last week I listened to Dick Patterson tell the story about his first time back in church after his first wife, Nancy, had died. He said it was on a Palm Sunday and he had arrived early, taking a seat in the same pew he always had. But this time he was uncomfortable because he was alone. He wasn't sure he was ready to be back in church yet. Just as he had made up his mind to leave, a seven-year-old girl—Alice Scott's daughter, Sarah—jumped into the pew seat in front of him turned around and said, "Good morning, Dr. Patterson." As he explains it, that little girl

continued to ramble on for ten straight minutes until others came in to surround him in comfort. He said, "That little girl saved me that day." But we know it was God. A tiny resurrection moment had found him. It calls out to us by name: "Good morning, Dr. Patterson."

So, 1) Resurrection happens in the dark. 2) We don't always recognize his presence. 3) And resurrection isn't something we find, but it finds us.

But listen! There is one more piece to Mary's testimony that we must pay attention to: Jesus tells Mary to "Go and tell the others." *We are commanded to share what we've seen with others.* How else is the good news going to spread? Notice, Mary tries to cling to Jesus—cling to the resurrection while you can! Except we can see the risen Christ, but we can't cling to him. We can confess our faith in him, but we can't own him. Jesus is loose in the world and no church, or theology, or stone-walled tomb is going to hold him down. Jesus is clear, "You have to let me go! But go and tell the others what you've seen." Jesus doesn't say, "Explain it to them!" or "Give them answers." It is not our place to answer for the mysteries we encounter. Instead, we are to witness to them.

Like the blind man who said, "I was blind, but now I see!" "How?" Everyone wants to know. "I don't know...all I know is I couldn't see before and now I can!"

Or the woman at the well: "He told me everything about myself." "Well, how?" We want to know. "I don't know...I can't explain it."

We can't explain it when someone is on their death bed and makes a miracle comeback. Or when a loved one finds the strength to start the recovery process from an addiction. Or when someone opens their heart and loves again after a messy divorce or a sudden death.

We encounter resurrection moments, but we can't explain them if we tried. All we can do is tell the story and share what we have seen. The rest is up to the risen Lord himself.

So Mary's story tells us that 1) Resurrection happens in the dark. 2) We don't always recognize resurrection's presence. 3) Resurrection finds us; and 4) we are to share our resurrection stories with others.

The truth is, we might not have the Easter gospel without Mary's witness. She is the first one to tell us, "I have seen the Lord." And it just so happens that these are the final words we hear her say. Perhaps it is because there is nothing left that can be said. At least until we experience the Risen Lord for ourselves.