



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter Day (B)

In the Garden

**RCL: Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or Acts 10:34-43;
John 20:1-18 or Mark 16:1-8**

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

In this account of the Resurrection from the Gospel of John, we encounter Mary Magdalene in an intimate moment of great loss. Three times in these eighteen verses, she grieves in direct quotations:

- “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”
- “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”
- “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

We, the readers of John’s gospel, who experience the cycle of death and resurrection every year, know that Jesus’ body is gone from the tomb because he has been resurrected from the dead. But Mary doesn’t know that. All this woman wants at this moment is to tend to the body of her murdered, martyred spiritual companion, prophet, and teacher, the man who is so close to God that he can work healing miracles.

Mary Magdalene is sometimes conflated with Mary of Bethany or the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7. The Mary Magdalene of John’s gospel has been described in more detail in Luke 8:1-3: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.”

It is widely accepted among secular historians that Mary Magdalene was a real historical figure. This Mary (a common name among Jewish women of the time) came from the Galilean fishing town of Magdala. She traveled with Jesus and supported him financially from her resources. A leader of the women who supported Jesus’ ministry, she was devoted to the holy man who had healed her of her demons. Jesus offered a gospel of hope for the oppressed that would have appealed to a woman with means and capability, who was restricted by traditional gender roles. Mary Magdalene was a female leader, a

counterpart of Peter. She witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, and now she is the first witness to his resurrection.

The scene of the resurrection in John's gospel is a garden. In Jerusalem, there are two possible locations for the site of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, according to ancient tradition the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus, is a deeply moving place, a large and glorious place of worship, crowded with a diverse and international cast of Christians gathered in reverence and awe. The Garden Tomb, just outside the city walls, was excavated in the nineteenth century, and its proponents offered this new discovery as an alternate possibility to the traditional site. Wherever the historic Jesus was laid in the tomb, the site of the Garden Tomb evokes the scene in John's gospel, a quiet garden, with a water source and paths among olive trees, vines, and natural stone walls, where Mary Magdalene might have sat weeping, where, in her bewilderment, she might have mistaken the man she encounters for the gardener.

And then Jesus calls her by name, and she recognizes him. *Rabbouni!* she cries in the colloquial Aramaic. This is an intimate meeting; he appears to her alone, after Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, have departed. One imagines that Mary reaches for him, to touch him, to embrace him. But Jesus, her friend and teacher, steps back. He says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

In hospice settings, at the bedside of the dying, those close to death, ready to cross the threshold between life and death, can be held to life by those watching at the bedside. It is not unusual for a patient to pass in the few moments while the watcher has stepped out, even only as far as the bathroom. The one on the threshold may need the watcher to let them go before they can pass over, as much as this may grieve the ones left behind.

Mary's attachment to Jesus, her desire to hold on to him, echoes the story of Elijah the prophet and his disciple Elisha. In 2 Kings 2:1-12, we read that when the prophet was about to be taken to God, Elisha refuses to let him go. Repeatedly, Elijah asks his disciple to stay behind. Repeatedly, Elisha says, "I will not leave you." The company of prophets reproaches him: "Do you not know that the Lord will take your master today?"

"Yes, I know," replies Elisha, "Be quiet!"

Finally, Elijah insists that he must go and is taken up into a whirlwind as Elisha watches him cross over the threshold to heaven. Then, like Mary, Elisha weeps.

Do not hold on to me, says Jesus, for he has not yet crossed over, ascended to the Father. This is the ultimate liminal moment. Jesus is between states, his humanity lingering before he crosses the threshold. John's telling of the Resurrection resonates with human grief and human death, with Mary's human grief

for her human teacher, her spiritual guide. But Jesus is not crossing the threshold from life to death. Jesus is crossing the threshold to glory, to eternal life in God.

Go tell the others, Jesus instructs her, and Mary Magdalene announces to the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!”

This is the resurrection moment! With these words, we know that Christ has overcome death, that this passing from human life is something different, something unique, miraculous, salvific. Mary has seen God. She has seen her beloved Rabbouni crucified and laid in the grave, and she has seen him risen from the dead as her lord and savior. It is the ultimate revelation, the experience of Jesus as both human and divine.

I have seen the Lord! For Mary, as for us, sorrow and joy are integrally linked. At the empty tomb, in the quiet garden, our faith in the work and message of Jesus is affirmed. We go forward in hope, with purpose, to tell the others.

Let us pray: Jesus, our friend and savior, even in our sorrow at the grave, you are there. May we hear your voice when you call our name. May we see you; may we know you, and may our hearts be filled with faith and hope and the joy of the Resurrection. Risen Christ, you are always with us, even when we weep. Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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