

Easter Sunday (B)  
April 4, 2021  
Text: John 20:1-18

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That first Easter morning began with a visit to a tomb. Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb to grieve for Jesus' death, to grieve for her sense of loss. I wonder whether this year more than ever we might appreciate Mary's feelings of loss because they remind us of how we feel and what we've been through. In the United States, more than half a million people have died from the coronavirus. And how many more have died from gun violence, or addiction, or suicide? Some of us have lost neighbors, or friends, or members of our extended family. Some of us have lost jobs. Our children have lost an irreplaceable year of learning and development. Some have found long-held beliefs about our nation, about justice and fairness, to be deeply challenged and shaken. We come to this Easter morning with more than enough loss, more than enough grief.

For that reason, as you hear the Easter proclamation that Christ is risen, I hope you also hear more than enough good news—that God is at work in our world and in our lives to bring healing and hope and new life. Death and loss are unavoidable, inescapable realities. They are just part of the way this world is. But God is at work for resurrection, for a new future of life and blessing and wholeness. It's a future that begins with Jesus, and will include every one of us, and every one of those we have loved and lost. And even more, that future, which is greater than anything we can even imagine, is already intruding on our present with power to change our lives now. Even though death and loss govern so much of the world we live in, we can experience the power of Christ's resurrection to set our hearts free, to give us abundant life today.

We might imagine Mary Magdalene as a kind of guide for us—someone who is able to show us what happens to a person whose life is changed by an encounter with the risen Christ. I wonder what she can show us about our own lives and what Christ's resurrection power can do to us. For Mary Magdalene, her part in this story begins with grief and confusion. She arrived at Jesus' tomb weeping. When she saw the stone rolled away from the tomb, she jumped to the conclusion that his body must have been stolen. When the risen Christ spoke to her, she mistook him for a gardener. She even seemed to imagine that if the gardener were able to produce Jesus' body, she, by herself, would somehow be able to carry away the dead weight of a full grown man. I know what that kind of brain fog is like. When we are overwhelmed by loss and grief, our brains just don't work right. We forget things we ought to know, we get easily confused by simple tasks, we don't feel we have any kind of perspective on our lives, and making any sort of decision is just about impossible. I wonder if you've been feeling any of

those things during this past year. For Mary, the turning point came when Jesus spoke her name. Being known helped break through the fog for her. Being known by Jesus, that relationship in which she knew she was loved and forgiven and valued—that was what opened her eyes.

And I wonder if we have experienced something similar—maybe not physically hearing Jesus calling our name, but there are other ways we experience Jesus alive and present. I wonder if, through the words of scripture, you have heard the risen Christ say that you are known in all of the complicated messiness of your life, and you are loved and forgiven. I wonder if, through the meal of Holy Communion, you have felt yourself to be welcomed and embraced with Christ's graciousness. At Christ's table there is a place for you. I wonder if, through the community of God's people, where Jesus is alive, you have felt that no matter how the pressures and demands of life might weigh upon you everywhere else, here, as part of the body of Christ, you are accepted just as you are. There's no need to be anything other than yourself—imperfect, fallible, but also treasured as God's beloved child. I wonder if sometime in worship, when you've been singing, if you heard your own voice sing the deepest truths of your life—the truth of your own deep need and the truth of God's endless love, and the truth of your joy at being touched by love so deeply. I wonder when you've heard the risen Christ call your name.

For Mary Magdalene, that recognition, that profound gift of being known, brought the most astonishing, life-altering change. She went from grief to joy, and from confusion to clarity, and from aimlessness to purpose. For Mary there is the joy of recognizing Jesus, there is the clarity of knowing that the One who loves her is alive, and there is a sense of purpose—a mission. Jesus sends her to share the good news and share the joy with the others. No longer is she grieving and confused and wandering around wondering what to do. In the story, it all happens in a flash. Jesus speaks her name, "Mary," and she turns in recognition, and everything is changed. In our lives, I imagine we usually experience this change as more of a process—a process that might unfold over the course of our whole lives. But we can still experience the same movement—from grief to joy, from confusion to clarity, from aimlessness to purpose. It all grows out of being known and loved and treasured by our Creator.

If there is anything we need after a year of pandemic, it is exactly this movement—grief to joy, confusion to clarity, aimlessness to purpose. As we open our hearts to Jesus, as we yield our way to Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, as we let Jesus' values define who we are and how we will live, this is how we experience this movement—how it moves us. Joy comes from knowing God's love is more powerful than death. God's love is more powerful than hate or selfishness or fear. And joy comes from knowing God's love has claimed us—to belong to God forever as God's treasured children. And clarity comes from knowing that our own truest life,

the only life worth living, is a life shaped by love and directed by love and empowered by love. Clarity comes when we recognize how deeply God loves this world—and we want to love it too. And purpose! Just like Mary Magdalene, our sense of purpose in life is now connected to God's work to heal and renew all of creation. Our purpose in life is to be part of Jesus' way of compassion and justice and peace. This is the movement that God's grace and love produces in us—joy, clarity, purpose.

Dear people of God, this past year has taught us a lot about the unpredictability of life, how temporary and tenuous it all is—and how much we need to be able to live with joy, and clarity and purpose. Easter shows us we can rely on God's love and faithfulness, through this life and through all of its challenges, and beyond. Easter shows us that God's commitment to this whole creation, and to each one of us, is not temporary. It is not limited. It is the resurrection life we most want to live—with joy and clarity and purpose. Thanks be to God. Amen.