

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM
Easter Sunday 2025 Preached in 2025
Text: John 20 1-18
Following Love into Mystery

One of my favorite drives in New Mexico is taking the road along the river to Taos. When you crest the last hill headed north, the whole Taos plain and Rio Grande Gorge opens out in front of you. Almost always people are standing in the pullout after the rise, taking in the expansive view, captivated by the beauty of it. People are enthralled by being in the presence of something so vast and beautiful. It takes your breath away no matter how often you have seen it. As one person once told me, when they look at that endless landscape it expands their soul.

John's Gospel casts us as witnesses to the witnesses. The focus of the story is on the vastness of the resurrection, the deep mystery of what God is doing in Christ, but it is also on the people whose souls are expanding in response to the unspeakable beauty of the Risen One.

John's story of the resurrection begins and ends with one particular witness: Mary Magdalene.

John writes: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

Mary loved Jesus. That morning she was following her **love into grief**. She wanted to be near her friend and teacher even if he was no longer alive. But instead, something strange and beautiful happens: It is this mystery that we place at the center of our lives this day.

Mary comes to the Garden, to the new tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. The text is deeply symbolic. The Garden reminds us of the story of creation, where the first citizens of the world lived in an idyllic communion with God.

We remember the story of Adam and Eve, how they went afoul of God's purposes, disobeying God's command and were banished from the garden into the outside world with its pain, suffering and death. In the garden Adam and Eve were also kept from eating of the tree of life so that they could not "eat and live forever." This also is a story about the Garden of Creation about God's wild creativity in reclaiming paradise in the midst of what looks like a disaster.

The time that Mary visits the tomb is also symbolic. The "first day" tells us that something new is about to happen. The first day will unfold into other days. It is a day that does not end with the evening. It is connected to other days that follow. Mary's understanding will grow with time. Something is barely beginning early in the day but consciousness will develop, awareness will break in, and a new creation will take hold.

The darkness will give way to light just as it did in the creation story, the story of our origin, the story of God's creative power separating the light and the darkness on the first day of creation. The Spirit that swept over the face of the waters in creation and brought light out of darkness at the beginning of time will also bring light out of darkness to Mary on this first day of the week.

As Mary approaches the tomb, she sees something is wrong. The stone seal had been rolled away. At this point in the story, there is a lot of floundering chaos, and it is no surprise, for Jesus has gone missing. Fear seized Mary, and without looking into the tomb, she runs in terror back to tell the others.

Peter, and we assume John, the beloved disciple, (to whom this gospel story is attributed) head for the tomb. The boys had a bit of a foot race back to the tomb that even in her grief made Mary laugh, their sandals slapping the ground, their robes flying. It sometimes makes me wonder why churches don't have track teams instead of softball leagues?

The men found that the wrappings were still in the tomb, and the head cloth was neatly rolled up. Martha Stewart would have been so proud.

But it was all passing strange. If someone had taken the body, the winding cloth would not have been left behind. Here were the linen wrappings but where was the body? Their minds and hearts spun as the sky began to lighten. The boys wander home bewildered, perhaps hoping to reconcile what they have seen with what they learned from their rabbi when he was alive.

But John writes, "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb," lost in the fear of her missing friend, her soul contracting in the ruin of such devastating news. She finds her courage and looks into the tomb for the first time. She sees two messengers "in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying." They ask her, "Woman, why are you

weeping? and she pours out her story, her grief, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

“They have taken him.”

“They” are the nameless impersonal forces that secretly are at work to frustrate our best efforts and undercut our carefully constructed plan. “They” are, as our baptismal covenant describes them, the “evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” And while this way of talking may fit many of our own circumstances today, they joyfully will not fit the situation Mary finds herself in at the tomb.

The angels try to redirect Mary’s tears, but her grief must be respected. Mary represents us, the human condition, our fierce love and attachment to physical reality.

She is searching for Jesus-- the dead body of her beloved-- is what she desires to see. That’s what she expects, and that is what we expect. But, like Mary, God finds our desires not too strong but rather too weak. She is still following her love into grief. But soon she will be following her **love into mystery**.

Bereft and confused, Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize him. **To turn is to change, to see differently, to repent.**

Mary is in the process of seeing the world differently. She is on the edge of a **soul-expanding moment** as she engages who she thinks is the

gardener. Jesus' questions are about helping her to see anew, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" If she can investigate her grief and the true identity of the one whom she is looking for, she could move from sorrow to joy, from being lost to being found.

As a gardener I love this part of the story. She said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

It's such a delicious passage full of word-play and confusion. Why does she think he's the gardener? Does he have dirt on his knees and pruners in a sheath on his side? But then again Jesus is the gardener, the New Adam who has reestablished the connection between humanity and God that the first gardener and his partner lost in Eden.

Mary calls Jesus, the supposed gardener "Sir" or "kyrie" in Greek. But "kyrie" in Greek can mean either "Sir" or "Lord." She means it as "Sir," but in truth it is "Lord." She is talking to the very one she is looking for. We see only that which we are ready to see, only what our souls are ready to take in. In a hilarious and lovely way, everything that Mary wants is happening and will happen, but not in the way she expects.

And then everything changes, Jesus calls the one who seeks him by name, "Mary!" The generic woman has changed to the personal Mary, and suddenly she sees Jesus as he is, her friend and teacher, her beloved, alive and talking to her, but now the Risen One. One word is all it takes, to believe and understand, to break into joyous worship: her very own name. Mary turns a second time and this turning brings her

into a new spiritual consciousness. She recognizes the Jesus she knew before his death, and now she sees him as something entirely new as well. **She has followed her love into Mystery.**

Jesus is the good shepherd, “The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own by name.” (John 10) Mary has found and been found by her beloved.

I imagine that Mary threw her arms around Jesus, clinging to him for the dearness of life itself had come back into her beloved’s body. In the end Jesus has to tell her to let go, not to hold on to him, for there are other reunions planned, there is more resurrection work to do. I’m not sure how long Mary lingered there near the tomb with the gardener of heaven and earth. To be with him again was intoxicating, and I believe it was Jesus who probably eventually took his leave as suddenly as he had come.

Mary’s heart was on fire, I imagine she had a bit of a sprint back to tell the boys and everyone else the news “I have seen the Lord.”

And where does this beautiful story of following love into mystery take us? If you have lived a while, you’ve probably lost someone dear. None of us are immune from death. Over these past few years at St. Mark’s we’ve lost many that we loved. The losses have piled up and the pain and suffering along with them, not just deaths, but; missed opportunities, painful health struggles, the challenges of mental illness and addiction stalking our young. And lately many of us feel that something is dying in our beloved country as civility gives way to

revenge, diplomacy is replaced by bullying, and safety gives way to fears. Death comes stalking all of us in one way or another.

Love and death are also connected in the two scenes of this Easter story. It is the Beloved Disciple who reads the signs of the discarded clothes; it is Mary's love that drives her passionate grief; it is Jesus' love that calls Mary by name. The Apostle Paul's theology also places love in tension with death. In his famous hymn of I Corinthians that you've probably heard a million times at every wedding you've ever attended: Love:

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (I Corinthians 7,8)

In Romans 8, one of my favorite parts in all of scripture, Paul makes it clear that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." According to these sacred texts, it is both human and Divine Love that questions the finality of death.

If Divine love does not accept the finality of death, then following the way of love into mystery is a delicious invitation.

"...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We are tempted to talk about the story of the Resurrection as meaning that the teachings of Jesus are immortal or that the Spirit of Jesus never dies in the or perhaps a miracle of faith that never dies, doubt turning to faith, fear into hope. But if I believed that this or something like this was all the Resurrection meant, then I would turn in my ordination papers and find another line of work or at least I hope I would have the courage to do so.

But this morning we proclaim that Christ is Risen because deep down we believe that in the dark hours of that morning long ago as Mary stumbled to the tomb following her love into grief, Jesus got up, with life in him again and the glory on him. And though these words are still strange, today we proclaim them with joy and faith and hope and above all with love beyond hoping. He got up and said “don’t be afraid.” He got up and said, “Lo, I am with you even unto the end of the world.” He got up and said, “Peace be with you.” He got up and said “Feed my sheep,” He got up and said, “Follow me.”

In the end it is God’s will that is done, not ours. To say Christ is Risen is to say that the deep love of God is victorious. To proclaim our life in the life of the Risen one is to say that death is not the end. Rather, the end of the story is life. For in Christ there is life and our life is found in this most beautiful life, in him and through him. For life itself is more than we could have dreamed. There are more depths of beauty, mystery, compassion and blessing than we can imagine. For Christ arose from the kingdom of death into life. For Christ is Risen and the end is life itself. So, do not be afraid of following your love into grief but take heart from Mary whose weeping was turned into joy. For following

your love and the love of God will bring you into mystery. For Christ is alive and that makes all the difference.

So go with Mary to the tomb and look inside, find within it the vast emptiness of resurrection, the new tomb still unused and feel your soul expand. For Christ is alive, and your life is bound up with his life beyond the grave. Christ has risen from the death trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

Follow love into mystery, the mystery of life that cannot be conquered by death, the mystery that will expand your soul and draw you close to the Risen One.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!