

“Greater Love”  
St. Paul’s United Church of Christ  
April 4, 2021

Friends in Christ, the tomb is empty. He is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!!!

Jesus promised that he would rise again, and he kept his promises. After a few days of darkness, a new light shone.

Easter is recorded in all four of the gospels with each having slightly different details. One thing that is in common was that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb.

Probably the most familiar story of Easter is that from John’s gospel where Mary encounters the risen Jesus, from Chapter 20, verses 1-18:

<sup>1</sup>Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” <sup>3</sup>Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. <sup>4</sup>They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. <sup>5</sup>Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn’t go in. <sup>6</sup>Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. <sup>7</sup>He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. It wasn’t with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup>They didn’t yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

**Jesus appears to Mary**

<sup>11</sup>Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup>She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. <sup>13</sup>The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” <sup>14</sup>As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus.

<sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means *Teacher*).

<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

May God bless our hearing of His holy word!

Mary Magdalene was healed by Jesus, exorcising some seven demons, and she became a follower and was with him all the way to Jerusalem.

The last few days had been topsy-turvy for her. She saw the crowd welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, but he didn’t take over the government. She saw how the crowds turned against him and she was with him as he was crucified. She followed to body to the tomb so she knew where the burial took place. Then it was the Sabbath when nothing could be done with the body. We can just see her crying until there was no tears left to run. Sleep would have been fitful at best. Now the Sabbath is over and she can go to the tomb. We don’t know what she expected to do. It was doubtful that she would have been strong enough to roll away the stone. Perhaps, it was just to sit there and talk to him. Many of us go to cemeteries to remember loved ones. We place flowers on graves. We can picture Mary going to the tomb.

In the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar, Mary sings the song “*I Don’t Know How to Love Him*” prior to Christ’s passion. It tells how torn Mary is about her relationship with Jesus, and should she tell him or not. Perhaps that is a song that each of us feel at times. How do we respond to Jesus? Do we view him as a human, which he was? Or do we view him as divine, which he is? He is unlike any other person in history.

Easter separates Christianity from all the other religions of the world. The tomb was empty because he had risen. Mohammed is dead. Confucius is dead. Buddha is dead. All other founders of the many religions are dead. Christ is alive.

Confusion reigned when she found that the stone had been rolled away. She went to Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved. They came and found the empty tomb. Why did they turn around and return home? Why didn’t they look for him? We can only guess. Only Mary stayed, and a miracle occurred, seeing the living, resurrected Jesus. Then to hear her name called in that special way one more time and she responded in love. We can only imagine the joy that filled her heart. She became the first person to tell of the good news that Jesus had risen from the dead.

He was alive. She couldn't wait to share the news with the disciples. She had heard his telling of what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem, but really, do people come back from the dead?

In many ways we can sympathize with Mary. We experience grief and sorrow in our lives, whether it a death of a loved one, or something not going as we would like. It is important to remember that we are Easter people. We have hope for tomorrow. God's love is so great that we cannot imagine it. Even in our Good Friday times, He is with us and His love surrounds us. Even in the most difficult of times, we must continue to trust His word and live with confidence.

With Easter, death was defeated. It is not the last word. We are people of hope and have the promise of eternal life living with God in that undiscovered place we call heaven. The resurrection confirms the good news that when met by God in human form and called by name, the task of those who bear the image of God into this world is to bring the testimony to everyone. It is a familiar story and has been passed on from generation to generation for over 2000 years, and we are to pass it on to future generations.

Mary gives us a picture of how to share the good news. She announces to the disciples of what she had experienced in the garden. Karoline Lewis writes in *Working Preacher*: "She does not offer the disciples a third person, impersonal, doctrinal statement about Jesus' resurrection, much like our liturgical responses at Easter, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Rather, it is a first person claim, a testimony, a witness to what she has experienced. She gives voice again to that which is so critical for this Gospel, one's own experience and encounter with Jesus so as to recognize who Jesus is. Mary's proclamation is not only a witness to her encounter with the resurrected Jesus, but also an interpretation of it. She realizes that for Jesus to be raised from the dead is also an assertion about her own resurrection, her own future. The first person statement is simultaneously an announcement about what she saw and a statement of belief in her promise of future life with Jesus and with God."

In 1984 the rock band Foreigner had a hit single titled, "I Want to Know Where Love Is." We know where it is. It is in a manger, at the empty cross, and at the empty tomb. God's grace is abundant. Death is no longer the final answer. Eternal life has been promised to us.

After all, we are Easter people. God's greater love has given us Easter, and that gives us hope for tomorrow. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!