

Go and Tell

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
April 20, 2025
Easter Sunrise

John 20:1-18



Alleluia! Christ is risen! **The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

As 21st Century Christians, we shout and sing Alleluia on this early Easter morn, but that isn't what was on the tip of Mary Magdalene's tongue all those years ago as she hurried to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. Mary Magdalene wasn't coming to celebrate the Risen Lord as we do on this first day of the week, while it is still dark. So why was she coming to the tomb?

She wasn't bringing spices which in other gospels is the reason for the presence of the women at the tomb. We know this because there was no need for spices since John has already told us that the body had been prepared for burial. You recall the story. We heard it just a couple weeks ago.

Jesus was at the home of Lazarus six days before the Passover when Mary, Martha's sister, anointed his feet with costly perfume which Jesus explained was for his burial, and then after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, secret disciples, brought spices and wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in linen cloths according to the burial customs before placing him in the tomb.

So why was Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb? She was coming to mourn. In her grief, she was coming to be as close to Jesus as possible. But instead of experiencing a peaceful time of prayer in the garden outside the tomb, Mary Magdalene surprisingly finds the stone has been rolled away. Assuming the body has been taken, she runs to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

I will let you picture for yourself the comedic scene of the two disciples racing to the tomb, finding it empty, and returning to their homes. On this Easter morning, I am choosing to focus on the one who comes alone to the tomb, who takes the initiative to tell the disciples about the empty tomb, and who then remains alone in the garden.

Mary Magdalene remains. She remains in the garden weeping outside the tomb. We know from experience that tears are a reflection of love, but we know it was also their custom from John's account of the death of Lazarus. When invited to come and see that Lazarus had died, Jesus wept due to his deep love for Lazarus. Mary remains alone to grieve due to her deep love for Jesus.

Mary didn't let fear keep her from coming to the tomb alone that morning, and she isn't letting fear send her home now that she has found the tomb empty. As you may know, fear can cause us to flee rather than remain present in difficult situations.

Not only is Mary Magdalene willing to remain alone in the garden, but she also finds the courage to enter the tomb. To her surprise, instead of an empty tomb Mary sees two angels in white. Not only does she see them, but she converses with them. They ask, "Why are you weeping?" to which she replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

You can hear the sadness and desperation in her voice. Mary is in such despair that instead of even waiting for their reply she turns around to see Jesus standing right in front of her, yet she does not recognize him. Then she still doesn't recognize him when he asks her, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Mary doesn't recognize her dear friend, teacher, and Lord with her eyes or with her ears.

Assuming him to be the gardener, Mary replies, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Mary loves Jesus. Even in his death, she desperately wants to make sure his body is properly laid to rest. Even after his traumatic death on the cross, Mary is ready to keep doing whatever she can to make things right when we come to this transformative moment where Jesus lovingly speaks her name, "Mary!"

In that moment, Mary's heart is opened, allowing her to recognize the presence her beloved Teacher and Lord. I wonder if Mary asks herself even for a moment, "how did I not recognize him?" or if she remembers Jesus' teaching about the Good Shepherd calling his sheep by name, and how his sheep hear his voice?

Are you trying to put yourself in Mary's place? When I imagine myself in Mary's place, I find myself reaching out to hug Jesus. Tears are certainly a sign of love, but so are hugs.

Jesus knows Mary wants to hold on to him. Not only to hug him, but to keep him with her, to hold on to his presence, but he clearly explains that this isn't possible because he hasn't yet ascended. Instead of an extended reunion, Jesus immediately sends Mary Magdalene to go and tell, and she obeys.

Mary goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." God chose Mary Magdalene to be the first apostle. She is only one present at the tomb in each of the gospel accounts of the resurrection. Mary is indeed the first apostle. She is the first one to go and tell of the good news that she has seen the Lord.

But let's go back to tomb. Mary wasn't wrong in supposing Jesus to be a gardener. Jesus isn't just a gardener, but The Gardener, in addition to the King of Peace, the Messiah, and the Good Shepherd, among others.

Mary didn't recognize Jesus with her eyes or her ears. It wasn't until Jesus spoke her name that her heart was opened allowing her to recognize him. When do we fail to recognize Jesus? When do we fail to recognize his presence in the person right in front of us whether it be at work, at the store, at home, or at church? When do we fail to recognize Jesus' voice speaking to us through a friend or an acquaintance?

Like Mary, many of us recognize Jesus most often when we are mourning. In the midst of grief, the Good Shepherd speaks our name, and when we, his sheep, hear Jesus speaking our name, our hearts are opened allowing us to recognize his voice and his presence. Jesus is certainly with us in our joys, but we often recognize his presence most in our grief.

We have much in our world right now causing us to grieve. I could certainly go through the litany of all I am grieving but will instead let you name that for yourself. Whatever that is for you, remember that in the midst of your grief, your shouts of despair, and your confusion, Jesus is present with you.

One of the great mysteries of our faith is the gift of paradox, the ability to experience contrasting emotions at the same time. This gift allows us to celebrate the joy of resurrection while experiencing the pain of living in a hurting world.

We come today to offer our Alleluias. We come not to escape the pain of the world but to rejoice that Jesus conquered death. We come to celebrate the joy of resurrection. To celebrate that death doesn't have the last word. Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. And he is with us our joy and celebration and in our sorrow and despair.

Like Mary Magdalene, early on this first day of the week while it was still dark, we came to be close to Jesus. We came to where we expect to find him, but Jesus is no longer bound by space and time. Jesus is risen and on the loose.

On this first day of the week, Mary comes to offer her presence to Jesus but instead finds his presence in an unexpected way. Upon receiving this unexpected gift, Mary offers her voice and her actions. Mary alone has the courage to remain in the garden, to enter the tomb, and to obey Jesus in word and deed when he asks her to go and tell.

Mary Magdalene is our example of how to respond to God's grace in presence, in word, and in deed. May we live our lives in ways that convey that we have seen the Lord and he is on the loose.

May it be so. Amen.