

1 Corinthians 15:1-11
John 20 :1-18

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
April 12, 2009, Easter Sunday

“Rabbouni”

When it occurs, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a spectacular event with crashing cymbals and blaring trumpets. Instead, the discovery that Christ is alive is like the quiet dawning of a new day, announcing the defeat of the long, dark night. The risen Christ meets His friends personally and intimately at unexpected times and places, overcoming their grief and doubt. They are flooded with joy and peace as they move from sight to faith.

At the heart of John’s Gospel reading for Easter is the appearance of the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene which leads to her witnessing by saying, “I have seen the Lord!” John tells us this wonderful story of a seeking woman who is surprised by what she finds, and even better by the One who finds her. Hearing her name spoken by Christ’s familiar voice transforms her grief to the opening of a new world.

Mary of Magdala is the first of Jesus’ friends and followers to come to the tomb. All she brings is her love for Christ. She has sinned much, but Jesus does for her what no one else can do. He forgives and cleanses her. So Mary comes in the early morning hours of darkness and discovers something has happened. The huge stone or boulder is rolled away. When Mary reaches the grave, she knows with dismay someone else has been there.

Seeing the open tomb, she assumes His body is gone. Without looking in the tomb, she runs to find the disciples. She tells her story to Peter and John the beloved who now race to the tomb to see for themselves. John reaches

the tomb ahead of Peter, peeks in the entrance, and sees only the linen cloths. Then Peter walks all the way into the tomb and sees the grave cloths neatly folded where Christ has been. The tomb appears as though Jesus simply stepped out into His life. Now John also enters the tomb, sees, and believes! With eyes of love, John the beloved sees and understands what physical eyes alone cannot penetrate. The empty tomb and folded grave clothes are quiet evidence for him that Jesus is alive. John believes! Love brings him to faith.

Soon Mary Magdalene returns and stands weeping at the tomb. She finally stoops and looks in, hoping Jesus' body is returned. There is no body, but she sees an angel at both ends of where Jesus laid. These angels are messengers of life. They ask Mary why she weeps. She sobs in hopelessness that someone has taken Jesus, and she does not know where He is.

As Mary turns to leave, she sees Jesus through her teardrops but does not recognize Him. Her grief keeps her from seeing the truth, as our grief does for us at times. Assuming He is the gardener, she asks to where Christ's body is moved. She wants to care for the body so it is properly buried. It is then the risen Christ speaks her name, tenderly, but with all the authority of One who has conquered death, "Mary!" Christ is the Shepherd calling one of His sheep, and Mary knows His voice. In an instant, Mary moves from extreme grief to extreme joy, from death to life. In adoration and amazement, she falls at Christ's feet and cries, "Rabbouni!" She clings to Him, but Christ gently explains He is only with her for a little while. He has not yet ascended to His Father in heaven.

Mary's anxiety and apprehension are natural. She comes to the tomb early, maybe for a time of private grieving, for preparing Christ's body a final time, for beginning the slow, painful process of coming to grips with the absence of One whom she loves deeply. Her tears come easily. The tomb is an appropriate place to grieve. But the removal of the stone and the empty tomb distract her and create fear and frustration. She cannot understand what is happening. She knows dead bodies do not simply disappear. Someone has to move them. Mary wants to find Christ's body, and move on with her grieving. Peter and John share her predicament.

Mary's world, and ours, is broken open when Jesus calls her name. In her mind, it seems illogical, impossible, and even unnatural that the One she thought to be dead is greeting her. Christ is not dead! He is risen and alive! It is a new day!

The conversation between Jesus and Mary is important. Mary wants to care for the body of Jesus according to burial traditions. But that is no longer necessary. Jesus tells Mary to not hold onto Him because He is not yet ascended to His Father. She is not yet able to realize the miracle of the Resurrection. Jesus' calling her name shatters her world of tradition and opens up a new future. She no longer needs to grieve. Instead, she can rejoice, and share the news with Christ's disciples, as He commands her to do.

Mary's reaction is an obedient response to Jesus' command. It is also an amazing statement, "I have seen the Lord." This knowledge will sustain her in this new day of the risen Jesus.

In Christ's Resurrection, He not only breaks the bonds of sin and death, but also destroys the limits of space and time and the weaknesses of earthly existence. By the power of God, Jesus brings a new creation. He prepares to return to His Father. Mary will be able to cling to Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus now calls His disciples His brothers and sisters since they have become sons and daughters of the Father through His death and Resurrection. We, too, are brothers and sisters of Christ as we all become members of God's divine family. Mary, who is the first to see the Lord, is to be the messenger of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension. Instead of allowing Mary to cling to Him, the risen Lord sends her on a mission to tell the others what she has seen and heard. Like Mary, we are sent to announce Christ's body is not in the tomb. He is with His Father in Resurrected glory.

I share with you the words of Joyce Hollyday from *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*. She writes: "As with all love, there are times to hold on and times to let go. The calling of Mary Magdalene is the calling of us all. She is an example of injury healed, spirit empowered, and life bestowed with grace. She lives out a fervor, rooted in her love for Jesus, that moved heaven a little closer to earth. She is all of us at our passionate best, when we refuse to live in the broken present and dare to dream of a future full of promise. We commune in intimacy with Jesus, as

Mary Magdalene did, when we accept the gift of abundant life and live as joyful witnesses to the resurrection.”

Christ wants us to be like Mary, Peter, and John the beloved. We have all gone to the tomb and have seen the stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty except for folded burial cloths and angels. Christ is calling our names and sending us to tell of the greatest miracle of all. Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered death and sin, and frees us from Satan’s forces, and promises us eternal life forever. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Let all God’s people say, Amen!