

**Easter Changes Everything, Including Us**  
**John 20:1-18**  
***Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021***

I would like to introduce you to a young woman, probably in her 20's. You could say that she's had an up and down kind of life. She has gone through lots of rough patches in her life. A couple of years ago something extraordinary happened to her. She met someone who was unlike anyone she had ever known. And she learned to love him deeply. Jesus was an attractive man, both to men and women. We often forget this. She became a follower. Her name is Mary of Magdala.

A variety of opinions swirl around Mary; some think that she had been a prostitute reformed under Jesus' teaching; others that she had been possessed of demons and healed. What we do know for sure is that she was a faithful follower of Jesus and gave a great deal of her time and resources to his cause. Luke tells us she was among: *some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities*. All four Gospels name her as one of the key witnesses to the resurrection. Indeed, today she is considered a saint in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches, with a feast day celebrated on July 22. Today we enter into her experience on that resurrection morning.

While not plain sailing, the Jesus mission went well for about two years. Jesus was popular with the common folks. But not so much with the religious leaders. They really seemed to hate him. And there had been warnings of the trouble to come. Even Jesus himself had taught them that suffering would be ahead and even death. And sure enough, after a dramatic entry into Jerusalem, things seemed to boil over. She would remember those last weeks like they were a nightmare.

Suddenly she was on a slope across from a small hill. On the hill were three of the obscene crosses, a common sight for them, but this time it was personal, for on one of them hung the man she had come to love. There he was writhing and moaning like a wounded animal. His body was naked, his face drawn and bloody. It had been a horrible sight. But she couldn't leave, like so many of the men had done. It was as if the cross and the suffering were like a magnet that kept her rooted to the spot. She stayed until the evening when the body was finally taken down. She made sure she knew where the body was taken. That night it was difficult to sleep. But somehow, she got through to the morning. She got up early; it was still dark.

It's at this point in the story that we joined her this morning, along with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. They had reached the tomb, but to their astonishment the stone guarding the entrance had

been rolled back. They are all terrified and through their tears and shock they run back to tell the disciples what has happened. Mary bursts into the hiding place, *they've taken him, they've taken him*. One of them asks her to calm down and tell them what she has seen. As soon as they understand they rush from the house, and she follows them.

John is the youngest and gets there first, but he hesitates. Peter, as usual the impetuous one, pushes past him, lowers his head and disappears into the darkness of the cave. John plucks up courage and follows him in. They stand in the eerie darkness and are thunderstruck. She was correct. Jesus is gone. To their amazement they notice that the linen that had wrapped the body lies on the stone slab and the head linen folded a little distance from it. That's all that's left. The body looks like it has simply evaporated into thin air. Both men are so dumbfounded that they forget that Mary is still outside. They push past her in a daze and return home.

Mary has waited in silence, sobbing silently. Now she too stoops to look in. For her, instead of shadows, there is blazing light where moments ago it had been strangely dark for John and Peter. The light seems to be focused on the exact spot where the body had laid. Mary experiences a sense of quiet and peace as if the light were communicating with her. She steps back into the open air, hears a voice, and turns to

see a figure in the shadows. It could be anyone and she thinks it must be the gardener. Perhaps he knows what has happened to the body, she thinks. But then she hears her name being called and suddenly she recognizes the voice. It's as if the world blazes with light just like it had been in the darkened tomb moments ago. It was Jesus himself. She wanted to fall at his feet and hold him. But he stopped her. He wants her to go and tell the disciples that he is alive. And that's what she did! She told them simply, "I have seen the Lord".

I know this sounds like a fantastic story that belongs to a world very different from ours. But the interesting thing is that men and women today have had the same experience as Mary. They have been assured, like Mary did long ago that Jesus is alive. He is risen.

We ought to notice, however, that even Mary had to experience this reality herself. She had hoped that she could continue the same relationship with Jesus she had always had during his brief time with her on earth. But the fact that Jesus stopped her from touching him sent a powerful message to her that her relationship with him was about to be transformed. Now that he was raised from the dead and returning to his place with God, Mary would know him in a very different way. Not merely as her teacher, not merely as her guide, not merely as the object of her devotion as her leader, but now as her Lord and God.

And so it is with us today. Whatever our relationship with Jesus may have been in our childhood and Sunday School days, this resurrection faith is a whole different kind of experience. We can't arrive at this kind of faith by deduction or logic. It is born in us by the Spirit, usually when we have reached our wits end. It's when life gangs up on us, perhaps a life crisis, or perhaps we have simply reached the point in our lives when things don't make sense any more. We need answers and the usual suspects don't seem to work anymore. Often that's when grace swoops in.

How does that happen, you ask? Well, there is no rational explanation for the spiritual experience that the bible calls conversion, or new life, or faith. But let me try with another story.

You have all probably heard of Harry Potter. He is born of wizard parents and possesses gifts that "muggles" (ordinary folk) don't have. The time has finally arrived for Harry to go off to Wizard school at a place called Hogwarts. He has his ticket for the train which leaves King Cross station at 11 am, platform nine and three quarters. Uncle Vernon wheels Harry's luggage to the platform. He has a nasty smile on his face as he says, "Well there you are boy. Platform nine-platform ten. Yours's must be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they? Just then a family passes and he notices that they are heading down to the

dividing point between platforms nine and ten. Then the three boys seem to vanish into midair. Harry's mother comes to the rescue of the puzzled Harry. Just walk right up to the barrier, she told him, and don't stop. In fact, best to do it at a bit of a run." Bravely, Harry pushed his trolley as fast as he could toward the barrier and as he got closer he broke into a run. It was coming at him fast and when only a foot away he closed his eyes and waited for the crash. But it never came. When he opened his eyes he saw platform nine and three quarters with the sign saying *Hogwarts Express*.

Jesus' resurrection is like Harry crashing through the barrier, except Jesus has disappeared into another dimension, not platform 9 3/4. It can't be explained rationally. It simply belongs to the spiritual reality of God's realm, where the rules of science don't work. Mary's experience was similar that shadowy morning at the tomb. And every Christian's experience of being transformed by new life in Christ, is a mystery of faith.

I don't know what barrier you will have to crash through to arrive at faith's door. I don't know what keeps you at arm's length from this Jesus who claims your heart. What I do know is that God's invitation is always personal. Just as it was to Mary that morning, God calls us by name and invites us into relationship. It's a relationship that will change your life. How we respond to that invitation is our choice. But however

we respond, it won't change the truth of this glorious Easter morning. Christ is alive, alleluia! Yes, Easter has changed everything for the human family, and especially for those who believe.

I sometimes listen to Neil Simon's album on which the second track is called "The Afterlife". The song tells us that you don't just go to heaven right away; you have to stand in line and fill out the form first. Eventually, Simon arrives in the presence of the Almighty. But what he faces is mystery. The last stanza goes like this:

***After you climb, up the ladder of time, the Lord  
God is near.***

***Face to face, in the vastness of space, your  
words disappear.***

***And you feel like swimming in an ocean of love,  
and the current is strong.***

***But all that remains when you try to explain is a  
fragment of song***

In the new heavens and new earth that resurrection points to there is profound mystery. But Simon has this one thing right; what awaits us in this new reality is something like an ocean of love. That is where resurrection points us. Faith in Christ and resurrection opens a door into this mystery.

**Amen**