

**Grace Episcopal Church -- Galena**  
**April 20, 2014**  
**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**  
**Text: John 20: 1-18**  
**"Whom Do You Seek?"**

Alleulia! Christ is Risen! [öChrist is risen indeed!ö Alleulia!]

Yes, it is Easter morning. The signs are all around us! Our wonderful Altar Guild transformed this place, this sanctuary and chancel stripped bare, from the darkness in which we ended Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The undraped cross has been returned, the white cloths and paraments in place. The chancel is filled with the glory and fragrance of spring flowers. Now we sit here in our best Easter clothes, singing alleluias and the familiar Easter hymns. We have lighted the New Fire, and from it, the Paschal candle and brought the light and the alleluias back into our midst. Ah, yes, it is Easter Sunday. All the sights and sounds and smells tell us so.

For Mary Magdelene, though, that long ago Easter morning was anything but bright and joyous. She didn't have any of these signs of Easter as she set out on her walk to the tomb before first light that day. [Of course, we all know that there wasn't **any** Easter observance until much laterö it took many years to come to an understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life and death.]

That particular morning was Mary's first opportunity to visit the tomb of Jesus. On the day of his death there had not been timeö not even time to prepare his body for burial. Everything had been rushed to place him in the tomb before sunset. For at sunset, the Sabbath beganö sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. On the Sabbath, no work could be done. Even walking was limited to short distances.

Mary's grief was fresh and raw. The crucifixion and death had happened so quickly. There had not been time to absorb it, let alone get on with the grieving. Perhaps she went, then, to kneel on the ground outside and pay her respects to her dear friend. Much like when we go to the cemetery on Memorial Day to place flowers on the graves of our loved ones. Maybe like us, she would stay there for a while and think about their times together, remember his stories and teachings, his pain and his laughter. And she would weep over those hopes and dreams that now seemed to be ended.

Most certainly she did not expect yet another shockö to approach that tomb and find it empty and not a soul in view. Just imagine the fear that she felt as she ran back to wherever the disciples were staying in Jerusalem. Who could have taken the body? And why? The Romans, perhaps. Or the religious authorities. Or maybe even bandits. These thoughts would swirl through her mind as she followed Peter and the other disciple back to the tomb, where they could see what she had told for themselves. Despair. Confusion. Deepened grief and helplessness overcame her after the men left her behind and returned home.

And then a voice spoke, öWoman, why do you weep? Whom do you seek?ö No wonder she thought it was the gardener! What a strange thing to askö a rhetorical question, maybe. Wouldn't you expect a good friend to say something like, öHey, Mary! Are you looking for me?ö Not, öwhom do you seek,ö for Heaven's sake! But then came an even stranger statement. When Jesus called her by name and she recognized him, he said, öDo not hold onto meö

“Do not hold onto me.” How perfectly natural it would be for her to reach out and touch this friend whom she had seen die less than two days ago. Or even to throw her arms around him and hug him in bewilderment and relief! “Do not hold onto me.” Was he warning her that his body was somehow different, maybe no longer the substance of human flesh and bones? Probably not. For just a short while later, he would invite Thomas to touch his wounds, which were real enough. “Do not hold onto me” had a far more profound meaning.

Mary probably expected that his next words would be, “Come on. Let’s go find the others and celebrate!” But though Jesus stood before her in that garden, though he had risen from death, he had not come back to life as it was before. He had not been resuscitated to return to his friends and his ministry and go on as though nothing had happened. This was not at all like when he called Lazarus forth from the grave and back to the living to pick up his life where it left off.

This **was** about new life, all right, a whole new way of living. For all of them. No longer could they hold onto Jesus, be solely dependent on him. For his earthly ministry had ended, their relationship with him would be changed. And they had everything they needed to go forth in his name to take the Good News to the ends of the earth. You see, Resurrection is not **only** about life after death, life eternal. That, in itself, was not the Good News that Jesus brought. Many Jews in Jesus time already expected that. The thing that was new was that Resurrection begins right here and now. That there is something more to life— a fuller way of living and loving. Jesus had shown them God in a new way.

Mary Magdalene walked in and through the darkness that early Resurrection morning. Out of her despair and grief came the unexpected, the unimaginable. New life and hope. But not something that could be had by sitting back and weeping. She and all who had been touched by following Jesus carried with them the power of this new life. They could risk letting go of things the way they had always been. They could open themselves to God’s transformation and accept new life that lies beyond the reach of death. And, I believe they did just that. For had they not, would we be sitting in this place this morning? Or would Jesus be just another forgotten 1<sup>st</sup> century prophet, his message buried in the sands of time.

Our world this year continues to know darkness— day after day, year after year. Just in this week: The shootings at the Jewish Community Centers in Overland Park, Kansas; the sunken South Korean ferry where so many are still missing, the violence in South Sudan, now very close to Bishop Joseph and the people of Renk. The remaining devastation of the Washington mudslide, and the still-missing plane, perhaps in the Indian Ocean. How can we celebrate Easter morning, the Resurrection, the light out of darkness, salvation, new life, in such a world? How can we not? As much as any other time I know of, we are a world in need of Resurrection and new life.

We cannot hold onto Jesus, but Jesus will hold onto us— he has promised to be with us now and always. There are deaths every day, the big one and many small ones— grief and disappointment, loss, fractures in relationships, sickness. But there are resurrections each day, too— the big one and many small ones. And, though we may weep in the night, it is joy that follows. Grief and death are not final. **Joy** is final. **Love** is final. It is life that follows death, not the other way around. Through Jesus’ earthly life, God has reached into **our** lives with a persistent and sustaining love.

God has done the unimaginable. And it is hard for us to understand. And sometimes, the only way to hold this mystery with our insufficient words, is to turn to the artists, the musicians, the poets. For with their art, they reach out to touch the sublime and the divine and bring it back to us in bold strokes of sound and color and melody.

Here, from poet and pastor Maren Tirabassi:

Out into the morning mists,  
I come alone,  
one last time to see you.  
I stoop to touch you,  
bathe you with my tears again,  
wrap you in my gaze of love  
for who you were.  
But here in the half-light of dawn  
the stone is rolled away.  
The linen cloths are cast aside.  
No body lies within this tomb.

But strange words gently spoken  
beckon me beyond my misty view,  
“Why are you weeping?”  
At first but dimly heard,  
and then, a second time,  
repeated clearly,  
a voice calls me by name.  
O, God, this is  
my life’s great healing teacher.

This is the voice I hear  
the same voice I knew,  
the face I see  
the same face I loved.

My knees give way,  
my heart and hands reach out  
to hold the one I knew as good  
who died before my eyes.

“Do not cling to me,  
come even stranger words,  
and I kneel before the mystery.  
Your death was real,  
and you are real.  
The light now fully dawns  
before my eyes that you  
have left the tomb behind.  
And I, I too, to live with you  
must let you die for me  
to set my new life free.

My friends, this glorious Easter Day, I bring you the Good News of the new life, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. I know that my Redeemer lives! Alleluia! Christ is risen! [Christ is risen, indeed!]

Alleluia and amen.