

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking this Easter Day: 'Jesus was dead, laid in a tomb. Hallelujah! Christ is risen! Morning has broken, tomb now empty. All: Hallelujah! Christ is risen! A new day has come, life not undone. Hallelujah! Christ is risen! Come and worship, the Lord is here! Hallelujah! Christ is risen!'

Hymn – Jesus Christ is risen today, *Alleluia!*

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God of new life and hope, of forgiveness and restoration and new beginnings, we meet on this umpteenth Easter morning to celebrate the astonishing good news that Jesus, whom everyone thought to be dead and gone, is alive and with us still; that the one whom everyone thought had been defeated has defeated death itself.

It cannot be for us as it was for his disciples on that first Easter morning— we know too much that they did not; have lived through too much that they had not, but we understand their confusion and fear. The first response to an empty tomb is not joy, but grief and anger. That has the ring of truth to it.

Our response, too, to things not being as we think they should be is to run around in circles looking for answers, and then for a safe place to hide. That also rings true.

Loving God, we come to worship this Easter morning, with no slick prescription for how we should be feeling, but exactly as we are: sad, tired, fearful, confused; with dawning hope and promise and fleeting glimpses of joy. We come as we are, and trust against all the odds, that you will come and find us here.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading: John 20: 1 – 18

The Empty Tomb

20 Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the entrance. ² She went running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”

³ Then Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. ⁴ The two of them were running, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and saw the linen cloths, but he did not go in. ⁶ Behind him came Simon Peter, and he went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there ⁷ and the cloth which had been around Jesus' head. It was not lying with the linen cloths but was rolled up by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in; he saw and believed. (⁹ They still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back home.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹ Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb ¹² and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ “Woman, why are you crying?” they asked her. She answered, “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!”

¹⁴ Then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ “Woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who is it that you are looking for?” She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, “If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned toward him and said in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (This means “Teacher.”)

¹⁷ “Do not hold on to me,” Jesus told her, “because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.” ¹⁸ So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her.

Hymn – Now the green blade riseth

Sermon – ‘What are you looking for?’

A question. Why are we here this morning? Well, I guess it is clear why *I am* here. It is my job. I am a minister, so I am supposed to stand up in church on Easter Sunday morning, or appear on Zoom and *say* something about why we are all here. Before the pandemic, it was my job, after we had eaten our Easter breakfast in the church hall and shared out crème eggs in the Sanctuary, to remind us all to think about why today is important. Why it is more important than cooked breakfast and chocolate eggs. This year is different from what you could call the ‘Eastwood normal’, so why *are* we all here?

I want to invite you to revisit the story with me and see if you can find yourself in the scene that unfolds on that first Easter morning. Particularly in the conversation between Jesus and Mary in the garden just outside the tomb – the rolled-away stone sitting off to one side, the linen cloths lying there, Mary so blinded by her grief that she is completely nonplussed by the appearance of angels – something that usually makes the people we find in our Bibles tremble with fear! Put yourself *in* Mary’s shoes and listen again to Jesus’ words.

First, ‘*why are you crying?’* Before Mary even knows who it is that speaks to her, Jesus meets her in her darkest hour. ‘*Why are you crying?’* says the One who heals to the one in pain. Says the One who comforts to the one who grieves. Says Immanuel, God with us, to the one who is lonely and afraid. ‘*Why are you crying?’* It is a question for each of us. For some the pain may be raw and open. Loss of a loved one. Loss of a job, or a home. Physical illness. Other wounds are more hidden. Anxiety. Depression. Addiction. Strained relationships. We all have burdens to bear, for ourselves, for others. ‘*Why are you crying?’* Do you see yourself in Mary?

And then, ‘*Who is it that you are looking for?’* Does Mary even know? It sounds more like she is looking for a ‘what’— a corpse, so she can get on with the business of preparing a body for burial. She is not even really looking for a ‘who’ – her own dear friend Jesus, alive and well. Or is she? Is there some level at which she wonders, hopes. . .but dares not believe it might be true?

Of course, her confusion and her doubts do not stop Jesus from revealing himself to her. He doesn’t require that she explain the theology of the cross and resurrection and its universal implications. She does not even have to know exactly who or what it is she is looking for. The touching irony of this scene is that while Mary’s busily looking

for Jesus, it is Jesus who finds *her*—and it takes a little while before she even knows she has been found. *‘Who is it that you are looking for?’* Do you see yourself in Mary?

How does Mary *know* she has been found? According to John it happens in a single word: *‘Mary.’* He calls her by name, this friend who knows her so well. She did not know who it was when they began talking—perhaps tears still clouded her vision—but suddenly that voice sounded so familiar. And she knew. Great theological truths are nice and all, but there is something to be said for being addressed by name. For standing face to face with Jesus and hearing him speak to you. How many of us wish we could have been there to see him after his resurrection as Mary did? How many of us wish we could hear the risen Lord calling out our name? Maybe you already have? . . .

Have we, like Mary, heard it while standing in a garden early in the morning, the dew still on the grass and the sun just starting to peek over the horizon? Or on the beach at sunset. Or hiking out in the woods. Or standing at a bus stop. Perhaps we think we heard it once while we were listening to a favourite piece of music. Or curled up on the sofa with a good book. Or sitting with our Bibles open. Or maybe we think we heard something that sounded an awful lot like Jesus saying our name when we were sitting in deep conversation with a close friend. Or sitting in church that Sunday. Or listening to someone reading Scripture on Zoom.

Or maybe, just maybe, we have heard that voice while standing beside the grave of someone *we* loved. Heard the risen Lord calling *us* by name and somehow, without quite understanding why, *we are* able to believe that death—no matter how real, no matter how painful—is not the final word. Do you see yourself in Mary?

If we do see ourselves in Mary Magdalene; if we hear Jesus asking *us* why we cry; if we hear him asking *us* who or what it is that we are looking for; if we hear him calling *us* by name, then we are also invited to hear how that conversation continues in the garden on Easter morning. With a word of challenge and a call to ministry.

No sooner has Mary turned and recognized Jesus – *‘Rabboni!’* – than he says to her, *‘do not hold on to me, because I have not yet gone back up to the Father’*. Do not hold onto me? Jesus does not prohibit Mary from ‘touching’ him, next Sunday we will see Jesus invite Thomas to do just that, but from ‘holding on’ or ‘clinging’ to him, for after Jesus’ ascension to the heaven, his continued presence in the world will be by means of the Spirit.

Today Jesus teaches Mary and us, that he cannot and will not be held and controlled. We cannot hold Jesus to preconceived standards and expectations of who he should be, because to do so is to interfere with Jesus' work limit what Jesus has to offer. You see, we just cannot nail Jesus down. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "we tried once, but he got loose, and ever since . . . has been the walking, talking presence of God in our midst."

Finally, we hear Mary's call, her commission from Jesus to '*go to my brothers and tell them. . .*' Remember, Mary Magdalene is the first Easter witness in both senses of the word 'witness'. She is the first to *see* the risen Jesus, and she is the first to *tell others* what she has seen. The core message of the Gospel is entrusted to Mary and she responds faithfully, going immediately to tell the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!"

If you think about it, the whole Gospel story is telescoped into this quiet exchange between these two dear friends: God meeting us where we are, wounded and broken. God calling us by name and giving us the gift of new life. God sending us out into ministry in the world.

Once again, notice the setting. The resurrection of our Lord and Savior – an event entirely unparalleled in history, an event that would change history itself forever, a cosmic battle, too, between the forces of good and evil, life and death, with a decisive victory for LIFE! Yet instead of thunder and lightning to announce his return, and a golden chariot to ride back into town, in fact without any pomp and circumstance whatsoever, Jesus returns into the world of the living in this quiet, intimate scene with one individual person.

I believe the choice of person was intentional. Jesus could have appeared first to Pilate, for instance. To Herod. To the chief priests. But no. He came first to Mary because the resurrection, for all of its universal significance, was also somehow about Mary herself. Standing all alone. Weeping. Wondering. Wishing things could be other than they were. Looking for something or someone able to change her world decisively, for the better, for good. And the answer comes in the form of the risen Lord himself. Do you see yourself in Mary?

So, why are **you** here this morning? What are **you** looking for?

This happens to also be the very first question Jesus asks in the Gospel, according to John. "What are you looking for?" he asks two disciples of John the Baptist who start

following him instead and the question of invitation that frames the entire story is asked of every one of us as we read it. “What are you looking for?” It is a question that asks us to discern and articulate our deepest longings—longings that, to John’s way of thinking, are addressed ultimately and fully only by encounter with God in Christ.

So, why are **we** here this morning? I suspect it is because we are an awful lot like Mary Magdalene. Like her in our weeping. Like her in our seeking. And wanting to be like her, too, in witnessing to the glorious, Good News of this Easter day. May John’s portrait of Mary’s courage, devotion, and faith inspire us to live as joyful witnesses to the resurrection!

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

In the Name of the Loving Father, the Risen Son, and the Guiding Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – All my days I will sing this song of gladness

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Risen Lord, we thank you for the hope of Easter morning that resonates in song and word, in laughter and shout, that bubbles up from the deepest places within us; breathing new life into each place of death and despair, filling this place with the good news that everything has changed, forever: despair has become joy, fear has become courage, questions have become faith.

As we celebrate, we pray for our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray your blessing on Bob and Pollokshaws Methodist Church, on Don and Auldhouse Community Church and on Roy and Pollokshaws Parish Church as we work and witness with them to your marvellous love and grace.

While we enjoy the hopefulness of this day, we recognise that for many people the question, “why are you weeping?”, is very real and very present. For too many of your beloved children, God of new life, it does seem as though death has the last word, as though fear can trump compassion, as though violence is the source of true power.

This day, of all days, is the day that laughs at those who thought that using fear, violence and death would bring their own success and happiness.

We pray on this Easter morning for those who find themselves trapped by the misguided decisions of others, for those who find themselves living on the streets, for those searching for meaningful employment, for those whose health in body or mind is poor, for those who struggle to raise their families, for those who know poverty, or hunger, or thirst. We pray that hope will find a way to break through and bring change.

We pray on this Easter morning for those who make decisions that impact on the lives of others; for national leaders, for local councillors, for heads of state, for business executives, for trade negotiators, for union leaders, God of compassion, we pray that they may put all their skill and effort into benefitting others, and not just themselves.

Risen Lord, this is the day when laughter returned to the earth and new life was breathed into creation. We rejoice and are glad; and we pray for your life-giving, laughter-making spirit to be set free in our world today and in the church, and in us, your ever hopeful, sometimes joyful, still wanting-to-be faithful people. Amen.

Hymn – Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,

Benediction

Love wins. Jesus lives and reigns. Sin is defeated. Death is conquered. He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! With hope and joy in our hearts let us go from here to love and to serve the risen Lord. And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remain with you and all whom you love this Easter day and forever more. Amen.

Closing Song – The Blessing (Hawaii)