

That *Easter Word*  
John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020  
From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church  
Matt Matthews  
A dialogue for two readers

**An Easter Prayer**

**M/R:** Disturb us, O Lord  
M: when we are too well-pleased with ourselves  
R: when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed  
too close to the shore.

**M/R:** Disturb us, O Lord  
R: when with the abundance of things we possess,  
we have lost our thirst for the water of life  
M: when, having fallen in love with time,  
we have ceased to dream of eternity  
R: and in our efforts to build a new earth,  
we have allowed our vision of Heaven to grow dim.

**M/R:** Stir us, O Lord  
M: to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas  
where storms show Thy mastery,  
R: where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.  
M: In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes  
and invited the brave to follow—

**M/R:** In the name of Jesus, Jesus, Jesus . . .  
R: AMEN. (Remove slide.)

—Adapt., attributed to Archbishop Emeritus **Desmond Tutu**,  
adapt. from an original attrib. to Sir Francis Drake.

Matt: I'd like to stay close to the story of the resurrection as it's recorded in John's gospel.  
My wife Rachel is going to help me. You can open your Bibles to Chapter 20 and read closely along.

Here in John's gospel we see resurrection primarily through Mary Magdalene's astonished, grateful eyes.  
May the Spirit open our eyes again (and again, and *today*) to God's amazing grace.

**John 20:1-18**

\*\*\* 1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,

**Rachel:** This line of John’s prologue places today’s action on Sunday, the first day of the week. One week ago, on last Sunday, Jesus paraded into Jerusalem humbly, mounted on a donkey. Thursday . . .

**Matt:** . . . Thursday, Jesus observed the Passover with his disciples, and had been betrayed; on Friday . . .

**R:** . . . On Friday, Jesus had been crucified, mounted on a cross, died, buried; from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown was the long, long Sabbath. Now, Sabbath has ended, so, too, has the restrictions against such things as travel, work, and—dealing with the dead.

\*\*\* Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (to deal with the dead) and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

**R:** Mary Magdalene didn’t go in. Was she afraid? Was she respectful of . . . the dead, or a crime scene? Did she not go in because this was a man’s job?

\*\*\* 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter

**R:** If you need help, if there’s a sniff of danger in the air, Peter is the kind of guy you want on your side.

\*\*\* and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [[probably John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James]], and [Mary Magdalene] said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and **we** do not know where they have laid him.”

**R:** Who is the “we”?

**M:** The other gospels note that Mary Magdalene and ‘other women’ went to the tomb to prepare the body. Matthew reports that “the other Mary” went with Mary Magdalene. Luke reports that among “the other women,” there was

**M/R:** Mary Magdalene,

**R:** Joanne, and Mary the mother of James. Mark reports that the women who went to the tomb included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—and as they approached the tomb their big question was “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

**M:** But, here in John’s gospel only one woman is mentioned—Mary Magdalene.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Mary Magdalene is mentioned a dozen times in the Gospels. Her name could refer to her hometown, a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Her name could relate to Aramaic or Hebrew words meaning “tower, fortress, elevated, great, magnificent.”)

\*\*\* 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

**R:** It appears that out of respect for Peter, the “other disciple” waited for Peter to go into the tomb first. As Mary Magdalene is often seen as the leader of the women (whenever they are mentioned), Peter is often seen as the leader of the disciples.

\*\*\* 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and **he saw and believed;**

**R:** The writer of John’s Gospel doesn’t elaborate about what ‘the other disciple’ believed. He believed what? That Jesus’ body was gone?

**M:** That’s obvious.

**R:** That Jesus’ body was stolen?

**M:** Could be.

**R:** That Jesus had risen from the dead?

**M:** Hum...

**R:** Maybe what Jesus had been saying *had*, actually, sunk in to this disciple’s head—that he (Jesus) would be betrayed, crucified, die, and rise again. *Could it be that’s what happened? Is this what this disciple believed?*

\*\*\* 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

\*\*\* 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

**R:** It’s interesting to note that while Mary ran to fetch the disciples to see the empty tomb, she didn’t go home with them. She stayed behind alone—alone with her thoughts, alone with her grief, alone with her tears. Alone, alone, alone.

Have you ever experienced that kind of aloneness, that singular, solitary, heavy, heavy weight of being all by yourself?

**M:** A lot of the world feels that way right now. We are isolate in our homes. Cut off from others. Sheltering in place.

**M/R:** Alone, alone, alone.

\*\*\* As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, [[incredulously]] **“Woman, why are you weeping?”**

**R:** It’s difficult—and perhaps wrong—to see any humor in a scene like this in an early morning graveyard. But the angel’s question is a comical, fumbling kind of question.

**M:** Right. Why else would Mary Magdalene be weeping? Her friend was not only dead, but his body had been gone missing.

**R:** Her heart, by now, must have pounded out of her chest. There she stands, empty-handed and as completely bereft as one could imagine. *Why are you weeping? Why are you weeping?\**

\*\*\* She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

\*\*\* 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

**R:** At this point, this text *begs* us to ask this question: ***How many times in our daily lives do we see Jesus but don’t recognize him?***

**M:** I’ve preached one hundred sermons about that question. And every *good* sermon I’ve ever heard has that question at least in mind.

**R:** ***How many times in our daily lives do YOU see Jesus but don’t recognize him?***

\*\*\* 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?”

**R:** If this question was possibly funny before, it’s painful now. It’s quite possible that her grief is being ground deeper and deeper into her hurting soul, and this question—like salt in a wound—will render her mute. The shock will simply snap her in two, she’ll become a pillar of unutterable sadness.

**M:** But, *amazingly*, she speaks to him. She politely and—even—calmly answers his obvious question.

**R:** Notice the high quiver in her voice, but notice, also, her poise:

\*\*\* Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).

**R:** The dramatic action of this graveyard scene rises and rises to this climatic exchange: Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus. (*We know it’s Jesus because the writer of John’s Gospel has told us; but she doesn’t know.*)

Her eyes are closed to the possibility of revelation. She has sunk—and we can’t blame her—too deeply into her grief, her sense of loss and pain and fear, her shock; the trauma of these last few days—parade,

Passover supper, betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death, death, death—has absorbed her. At this moment she sees the whole wide world only through a pinhole, a prick of light about to go out.

**M:** But with the 'gardener' calls her name?

**R:** When the gardener calls her name, she recognizes him as her dear, lost friend. As difficult as it is to identify with her grief—and we *can*, it's just difficult—we are invited, now, to imagine her astonished relief, her bone-deep joy.

**M:** He says her name, *Mary*, and she says his—

**R:** "*Rabbouni!*"

Grief, shock, terror have been subsumed by grace, reunion, shalom. A light has dawned in the early morning of this dark, graveyard scene.

We cannot find the words to describe it. We are left with only one word, a difficult word, a generally unused word, a decidedly Easter word: RESURRECTION.

\*\*\* 17Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**R:** Mary leaves the tomb. Her legs had gone from rubber to stone back to flesh and blood. The gospel tells us that she finds the disciples. She finds the disciples and announces, "I have seen the Lord."

**M:** AND, the church has been saying those words ever since.

**R:** *At first, I thought he was the gardener, but, sure enough, it was him. I have seen the Lord!*

*I have seen the Lord in the face of the newborn baby,  
in the faces of the new immigrant and the stranger,  
the lost and found,  
the foreigner,  
the broken and the hurting and the healed*

**M:** *I have seen the risen Lord in the faces of the on-line, socially-distanced choir.*

**R:** *I have seen the risen Lord in the faces of our health-care workers.*

**M:** *I have seen the risen Lord in the younger neighbors who pick up and deliver groceries to their older neighbors.*

**R:** *I have seen the face of the risen Lord in Zoom-prayer meetings.*

**M:**            *The risen Lord has called my name when a fellow church member has called me up on the telephone just to say hello, for no reason at all just to say that he cares about me.*

**R:**            *At first, I mistook him for the gardener, but it was him. Him! I have seen the Lord.*

**M:**            Grief, shock, terror, dismay, apathy, dry bones, broken lives . . . have been subsumed by grace, holy reunion, shalom.

**R:**            God knows us by name and even now calls us to bear witness to that light which long ago dawned in the early morning of a dark, graveyard scene—just as surely as it had dawned 30-years before in a manger. Light in darkness is a theme in John’s gospel. *Light in darkness.*

Words fail us: Hope, healing, life, glory . . .

**R/M:**        *Resurrection.*

**R:**            *The Lord is risen!*

**M:**            ***The Lord is risen, indeed.***