

Easter Sermon 2025
John 20:1-18 “*A New Relationship.*”

As I began preparing today’s sermon, I felt a bit of anticipation; well, perhaps anxiety would be a better description. Some of you have heard this story at least once a year for your entire lives, while others may be hearing it for the first time. The beautiful Easter story begins with, “Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away.”

The discovery of the empty tomb, along with Mary's confusion regarding the disciples, the angels, and the Gardener, led her to realize that Jesus was not dead but had risen from the grave. God’s plan for Mary’s life was unfolding; unfortunately, she could not perceive it. However, the fog in her eyes lifted when Jesus called her by name, granting her a new lease on life and a new relationship: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!”

The day Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he knew he would not be crowned but would be crucified as the final Passover Lamb for the sins of the world. Today, we gather to celebrate the King who serves you and me, raising us from death into eternal life through the gift of his innocent and sinless life. Today, we welcome Jesus, who rides into every town and circumstance of our lives with grace, power, and hope—a new relationship for all, giving his life for the sins of the world. Let us pray.

O Lord, Risen, alive, and full of grace. You paid such a price that we may live with you in a new relationship. We worship your holy name and give thanks for your redeeming grace. Come reign in our hearts and transform our minds and spirits. In this, we pray. Amen.

In the opening of today’s scripture, we see Mary Magdalene (and according to Mark’s gospel, along with Mary the mother of James) walking to the cross, and now her love for Christ compels her to run to the grave. Unlike the other synoptic accounts, John does not mention any of the other women who were among Jesus’ followers. The reason is unclear, but Mary Magdalene is likely the focus because she found Simon Peter, who told the other beloved disciple, John, as they ran together, one faster than the other.

A brief teaching is in order. The first three books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are called synoptic because they include many of the same stories with sometimes unified and identical wording, depicting Jesus's life, passion, death, and resurrection. Now that we have that settled let us identify Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene was a woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. After Jesus freed her from these demons, she became a loyal follower. Despite false rumors depicting Mary as a sinner or a prostitute, or the claim that she and Jesus were married, nowhere in the Bible is she identified as either. She was present at Jesus' mock trial, heard Pontius Pilate pronounce his death sentence, and witnessed Jesus being beaten and humiliated. She was one of the women who stood near Jesus during the crucifixion to comfort him.

But where were Jesus’ male disciples? The Bible tells us that the other nine disciples were not with Peter and John that morning, instead cowering in fear, hiding from the authorities.

In the context of ancient days, women were considered unreliable witnesses. Yet, despite the handicap, the first witnesses to the empty tomb were, in fact, women unwilling to lie about the empty tomb despite its potentially embarrassing nature. As the story continues, Jesus would later appear to numerous people, no less than ten times recorded in scripture, many in the book of Acts.

As the narrative unfolds, John runs ahead of Peter and arrives at the tomb first. He enters the empty tomb and sees the neatly arranged grave clothes. Suddenly, John perceives with clarity that Jesus has risen from the dead. As we read in verse nine, until that moment, neither John nor Peter had understood that the resurrection had been foretold in the Old Testament. As the disciples returned to their homes, what they needed most, just like everyone here today, was a meeting with the living Lord. The one who did not return home was Mary, who stood outside the tomb, weeping in pain and grief. She still believed Jesus was dead. Then, she saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus had been laid in the tomb. "Woman, why are you crying?" she was asked. "Because they have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him." Then she turned around and saw what she thought was the gardener, not realizing it was Jesus. He had come into the garden to nurture a drooping flower.

In many instances, when the disciples saw Jesus following his resurrection, they did not always recognize him. Why? Sadly, they were not looking for him. The question is, how did these disciples, who walked, talked, and ate with Jesus, fail to recognize him? The answer is that we don't know. But perhaps Jesus covertly hid his identity, for as Jesus said to Mary, *"Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go the rest of them and say, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God."* This was the man who had rid her of seven demons and whom she had followed since early in His ministry. Clearly, she loved Jesus. So much so that her first reaction was to grab hold of Him and not let go. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus and his disciples went to the Mount of Olives and promised His followers they would soon receive the Holy Spirit. Go, he said, and wait. As the disciples strained to catch a last glimpse of Him, he blessed them, and then a cloud hid Him from their view as two angels appeared and promised His return "In just the same way that you have watched Him go" (Acts 1:11).

As we reflect on Mary Magdalene's message about the empty tomb to the disciples, her proclamation, "I have seen the Lord!" affirms the reality of the resurrection and that the Lord had spoken these things to her. In 1912, music publisher Dr. Adam Geibel asked composer C. Austin Miles to write a hymn text that would be sympathetic in tone, conveying tenderness in every line- one that would offer hope to the hopeless, rest for the weary, and soft pillows for dying beds. The hymn is titled "In the Garden," found on Page 476 of our hymnal.

As Miles read the passage from the Bible, he was sitting beside his bed. He paused as if standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, head bowed, hand clasping her throat, strolled into the shadows. It was Mary as she came to the tomb, upon which she placed her hand. She bent over to look in and hurried away.

John, clad in a flowing robe, appeared and looked at the tomb. Then came Peter, who entered the tomb slowly, followed by John. As they departed, Mary reappeared, leaning her head upon her arm at the tomb, and she wept. Turning around, she saw Jesus standing, and so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him, arms outstretched, and looking into His face, cried, “Rabboni!” Suddenly, I awoke in sunlight, gripping the Bible, muscles tense and nerves vibrating. Inspired by this vision, Miles recalls penning the words as quickly as they could form, just as it has since appeared. That same evening, he said, I wrote the music.

*“I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses. He speaks, and the sound of His voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing, and the melody that He gave to me within my heart is ringing. I’d stay in the garden with Him, though the night around me be falling; But He bids me go through the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling. **And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.**”*

The thing that sets our faith apart is that the stone has been rolled away. The separation between God and us is torn. The resurrection changes everything—the focus of our lives changes. Many of us think we have to clean ourselves up before we come to Jesus. But Jesus says Whoever is weary and laden. You come. Whoever you are, come. There is always a resurrection Sunday. We serve a living Savior. Jesus is not dead; He is alive! When we experience the resurrected and living Savior, we have an all-access pass to a new relationship with joy and peace that the world cannot take away. Amen.