

## Scripture

### Psalm 118 NRSV

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.

There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:  
“The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;

the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.”

I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.

The Lord has punished me severely,  
but he did not give me over to death.

Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord’s doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

## **John 20:1-18 NRSV**

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

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

6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and 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. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and 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.

13 They said to her, “Woman, 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. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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).

17 Jesus 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.’” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

## **Sermon:**

It was dark when I got up this morning. The recent time change didn’t help any – at 5:30 it was dark, cold, and wet outside, with strong gusts of wind. As much as spring promises warmer days of light to come, early spring mornings are not a good time to be out and about.

But that is exactly where we find Mary Magdalene in John’s gospel this morning – out in the chill morning air, walking alone in the dark. We don’t know a lot about Mary – only that Jesus had healed her. There is a tradition that she was a former prostitute, though there is no scriptural evidence for that, so it’s past time that we stop maligning this woman. What we do know of her is that following her healing she became one of several women who traveled with Jesus and supported him and his ministry out of her own pocket.

Perhaps Mary couldn't sleep and was walking, trying to work out in her mind the events of the past few days. She had responded to Jesus' touch by investing much of her time and money – she had devoted herself to the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. But then Jesus was killed, and so Mary was left wandering – without purpose, and without hope.

Inevitably, she ended up at the tomb that Nicodemus had given up for Jesus, and there she discovered that the stone covering the doorway had been removed.

This scene that Mary had stumbled onto has a very important message contained within it. Picture a cold, damp morning. Nobody about. An open tomb.

Jesus was already raised before any of the Gospel characters appeared on the scene. There weren't even any angels or messengers from God present to make a pronouncement, no earthquakes, no fanfare – no witnesses.

What this scene demonstrates is that human interpretation or misunderstanding of the empty tomb does not determine its significance. Jesus was raised while humanity was both literally and figuratively in the dark. Before anybody was aware of the resurrection, it had already happened.

The risen son does not depend on our belief any more than the rising sun does. There was an article in a British tabloid that I read this morning that claimed that the Bishop of Wales had denied the resurrection. John's gospel points out the foolishness of such sensationalism.

According to John's account, the resurrection happened without us – alone in the dark. While we were still sinners Christ died for us, while we were still sleeping Christ rose for us. Whether we believe it, assent to it, decry it, or oppose it, our opinion does not affect the objective reality of Christ's life.

But, how we receive the news does have an effect on our lives. There are two images from the text I'd like to look at. The first is the response of the disciples.

Once Mary saw the stone rolled away, she did not sit down and ponder what all this could mean, nor did she cast about the cemetery looking for clues. She ran.

She ran hard; she ran fast. She ran to her fellow disciples and apostles to share what she had seen.

Once she delivered her message, they all ran back to the tomb. It was described as a footrace – each trying to outdo the other and arrive first. They didn't even know what they were running to – I don't think that they expected the resurrection – they consistently closed their ears and minds whenever Jesus spoke about suffering, dying, and rising.

It's more likely that they were running into danger, yet that didn't slow them down at all. They were not running in hope, but they were running with a different purpose. In their minds, certainly in Mary's mind, they were going to confront grave robbers. They were running to protect the body of Jesus from desecration.

Of course, a dead body cannot protect itself, so the disciples were running to protect the vulnerable, to do what was right.

When did we as a church stop being so fleet-footed? When did we stop running towards danger to correct injustice? At what point did we sit back and start believing that the world had to come to us, instead of us going out into the world with the same sense of urgency as those early disciples?

Certainly few people would accuse today's church of being a fast moving, responsive organization. But shouldn't we be? The early church was a group – or several groups – that were constantly on the move. They waited in Jerusalem as they were instructed, then exploded out throughout Asia Minor and Southern Europe. This is something to think about.

But, let's return to Mary again.

Having discovered with the other disciples that Jesus' body was gone, Mary stayed after the others had left, weeping alone.

Angels appeared, but before they were able to reveal anything to Mary she turned around and bumped into Jesus. Through her tears she did not recognize him, even when he spoke to her, her grief shadowed her mind.

Mary's moment of revelation came when Jesus called her by name. 'Mary!'

At this Mary turned – I think more than just physically – and saw Jesus. Many of us will be reminded of Jesus' words in the parable of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and his sheep know and trust the Good Shepherd. He calls his own sheep by name and he leads them out.

Names are important. When nobody knows your name, you stand outside the embrace of the community. When nobody knows your name, you become, in effect, nobody.

When your name is known and called, then you become enfolded in the community that calls you. When Mary's name was called by the risen Jesus she was enfolded into the company of heaven.

The Easter community, to which we belong, is a community whose members have heard the good shepherd calling their names. We join with Mary in being enfolded in that divine life and presence.

We also become a community of those who know the importance of knowing and calling the names of others. Whether the newest member in the congregation, or the latest person who came to our doors in distress, looking for help, the Easter community is reminded of the importance of speaking the names of all whom it encounters. By speaking their names, we enfold them in community – both human and divine.

Our Easter community has a special prophetic calling to speak the names of those who cannot speak for themselves - those who are outside the corridors of power; the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. When we call their names in public places we testify that God knows and calls the very least of these, and we include them in the communities of which they are rightly a part.

This takes us back to the disciples running to the tomb. They were running to protect a body. What could be more marginalized than a dead body? a body with no defenses and no voice. This is our model for church – to run to the aid of those who have no other recourse, to bring them into the center, into the light. Certainly, we are not to be piling our judgement upon those who are already pushed to the edges.

We are called to be a fast moving response team to bind the broken, and also an intentional movement focused outward, calling those who are wandering in the dark among the dead.

The tomb was empty on that dark morning, so many centuries ago. It happened while we were sleeping – God raised Jesus. The resurrection is God's yes, to humanity's no. Humans sought to divide and destroy, God answered with unity and life.

When we, in the dark, come across this reality we are faced with a choice. We can continue to wander in the dark, weeping among the dead. Or we can follow Jesus' and the disciples in recognizing life by calling its name, and speaking the kingdom further into being.

Choose life. God already has.