

## Easter Day 1 April 2018

[Acts 10: 34-43 Ps 118:1-2, 14-24 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11 John 20:1-18](#) Vanderbilt Lectionary

[Easter April 1 2018](#) Textweek

When I was back at the Cathedral I took a funeral for a beloved and long-time member of the congregation. The service was in the Cathedral and the burial was at Karrakata.

I'd finished the service at the graveside, and stepped back to wait for the cemetery staff to cover the casket and fill in the grave, when suddenly the youngest grandchild of the deceased, a small girl, only six years old, stepped forward and dropped a small, cloth envelope down on top of the coffin. She then came over to me and tugged on my vestments, indicating that she wanted to tell me a secret. I bent over so she could whisper into my ear, 'I put a few seashells in there so Grandma can listen to the ocean.' Then she walked back to her chair and snuggled up close to her mother.

Now, I've done a lot of funerals in my time as a priest, but that was, by far, one of the most touching moments I've experienced. And it got me thinking. This is what we do when someone we love dies. We do what we can to honour the memory. We care for the body, place flowers, put up memorials or monuments – the best we can within our means. We put envelopes filled with seashells in with our beloved. We do what we can. And that is what Mary Magdalene went to the garden to do. She wants to care for the body of Jesus. Cover it with spices. She wants to do what she can.

She comes early in the morning, while it's still dark, to do the only thing left for the living to do on behalf of their beloved dead.

And there is no doubt that Jesus was beloved. His disciples had left everything behind to follow him. They had put all their hopes on him. His teaching had blown their minds; his miraculous signs had dazzled their imaginations. They had begun to believe that Jesus may have been the One all Israel was hoping for –

the Messiah; the One who would finally rescue and restore God's people. They'd begun to suspect that Jesus may one day even be a King, a mighty ruler. But all those hopes came crashing down on Friday. Just when they thought things were about to break wide open; just as the crowds had begun to sing his praises, Jesus is betrayed by a friend, arrested, convicted, beaten, crucified, and dies. His followers are scattered. And now, all there is left to do is grieve, and care for the body.

That is what Mary comes to do. While it was still dark. John constantly makes reference to light and dark throughout his Gospel. The contrast between light and dark is symbolic. For John, those who are in the dark cannot see the truth of God. They cannot experience the reality of God. Those in darkness are theologically blind. When Mary goes to the tomb, to do whatever she can for Jesus, she is still in the dark. She cannot see.

That's why she runs off when she discovers the stone had been rolled away. Running to Peter and the other disciples, she comes up with the only conclusion people in the dark have to offer. She says, 'They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've laid him.'

Peter and the beloved disciple race to the tomb, only to discover it to be just as Mary had said. The stone was rolled away, and the body was not there. The linen burial clothes, they were there, but Jesus was not there. John writes that when those two went into the tomb, 'They saw and believed.' But remember, it's still dark. What they believed were, of course, the words of Mary: 'They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've laid him.' They're still in the dark.

Sometimes we get stuck in the dark, too, and miss the essential truth of Easter. Many years ago, back at the Cathedral, we were getting ready for Easter, and I wanted the Cathedral to look really good. Everything to be perfect. So I got a Verger on the job, and asked him to make sure the brass eagle was polished, the floors mopped, the pews dusted, and so on.

First thing on Maundy Thursday I went around the cathedral with this verger, and nothing had been done. 'The pews aren't dusted,' I said. 'Well, it's not my fault,' he replied. 'The floors haven't been mopped.' 'Well, it's not my fault,' he said. 'The eagle hasn't been polished.' 'It's not my fault.' And to every question I had, the verger's response was, 'It's not my fault.'

Finally, it was Easter morning. The Archbishop arrived and walked into the sacristy where the first person he saw was this verger. The bishop greeted him saying, "Christ is Risen!" 'Well, it's not my fault.'

Sometimes we're so caught up with what's going on around us that we miss the truth of things. Mary had come to the tomb to anoint the body with spices. But she was in the dark. She wasn't open to the essential reality of Easter.

After the other two disciples return home, Mary remains alone in the garden. She looks into the tomb, which just moments ago sat empty. But now, two angels in white sit inside it. They ask why she is weeping. Mary gives them the same response she gave to Peter and the beloved disciple. But then Jesus is there, standing behind her. She turns, and in her grief and darkness, she doesn't recognize him. Which is not really surprising. After all, she had watched him die. She mistakes the Lord for the gardener, which of course, he is.

This is another of John's Gospel's hidden gems. Four times in the Passion story, as it's told in the Fourth Gospel, there's a reference to a garden. Jesus is arrested in a garden, Peter was remembered as having been with Jesus in the garden, Jesus is placed in a tomb in a garden, and Mary recognised Jesus in a garden.

The other Gospels never use that word. Only John places these events 'in a garden.' And he does it for a reason. It's an echo of the creation story, which also happens to be where John begins his Gospel in his poetic prologue. There Jesus is the Eternal Word and is the agent of creation. John writes, 'All things came into being through him (meaning Jesus), and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.'

In the moment of resurrection, humanity is brought back into the light; into full relationship with God, just as it was in the Garden of Eden before the fall. Death is defeated, once and for all.

For John, this garden, where the Risen Christ stands before Mary, is nothing short of re-creation; it is that original garden restored.

The Risen Christ calls Mary by name, bringing her out of darkness and into light. She doesn't recognise Jesus when she first sees him, only when she hears him speak her name: 'Mary.'

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.' Jesus is the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

The Risen Christ calls Mary by name, and in that moment, she is changed forever. And so does her task. She'd come to the garden in darkness to care for her beloved dead; to do whatever she could do. But Jesus is not dead any longer. He is Risen! The darkness has been scattered. 'Where is death's sting? Where, grave thy victory?' Jesus is alive and he calls Mary by name. He sends her to bear witness, to proclaim the good news to the remaining disciples.

Jesus says, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" This is the proclamation of restored relationship with God.

Over these last days we've come to this place to honour the memory of Jesus, to do what we can do for one who is dead.

But that's not how we'll leave this place this morning. The Risen Christ calls us by name as well. We are changed because he is alive. Like Mary, we are transformed, brought into the light, and sent out to be witnesses of his resurrection.

Jesus is alive. The tomb is empty. Light has driven out darkness. We have been freed to follow Jesus. He is calling us by name. So, as we face the troubles of the world around us, those places where death and darkness are still trying to keep their hold, may our response never be, 'Well, it's nothing to do with me. It's not my fault.'

Rather, let us proclaim, 'I have seen the Lord!

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

John Shepherd