

Today, this Easter Day, I want us to consider the narrative of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ as a love story. This morning we hear the story that Christians heard 20 centuries ago from the Gospel according to John. And we are still trying to figure out how to love as Christ loved. We are still trying to learn to let God love us. When I read John’s account of that first Easter morning, I think of Mary Magdalene. I keep hearing “I don’t know how to love him” from the 1971 musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* that I have seen on stage several times – and on film. Yesterday we watched the 2018 version that was recorded live. It is a love story though not a typical love story we see on stage or on the large or small screen. And, as our Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church¹ has said many times, “If it isn’t about love, it isn’t about God.” You can probably recite this passage from John 3:16 with me: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only son...” Why? – so that all might have eternal life, eternal meaning being with God, not only when we die but in the here and now.

In *JC Superstar* Mary Magdalene wonders “What’s it all about?” and ends that song with “I love him so.” What is it all about? William Barclay, one of my favorite Biblical scholars, says that “No one ever loved Jesus so much as Mary Magdalene.”² But what do we really know of Mary Magdalene?³ Scripture tells us that Mary was the one to whom Jesus first appeared. And why did Mary go to the tomb?⁴ She went because she loved him. It was the custom in ancient Palestine to visit the tomb of a loved one continuously for three days after the body had been laid to rest.⁵ Jesus’s friends could not come to the tomb on the Sabbath.⁶ So she went to the tomb very early on Easter morning.⁷ It was still dark, but Mary went, because she could no longer stay away. And the stone had been moved. He was not there. Had someone stolen Jesus’s body? She ran to Peter and the beloved disciple to report that the tomb was empty. She told them “WE” do not know where they have taken him. Scholars believe that Mary Magdalene’s use of “we” – the

first person plural we – was because she was describing the scene not just for herself but for all of Jesus’s followers – for all who have since read this account of Jesus’s resurrection – for us. The author of John allows us to enter the story with Mary from Magdala.

If we identify with Mary Magdalene we might just find out how to love Jesus as she did and how to express that love in our world today. So, let us go to the tomb with Mary Magdalene. To set the scene, remember that she was among the disciples and followers of Jesus who had been with him throughout much of his ministry. She was with him when he was across the Jordan and came back to find that his dear friend Lazarus had died. And she witnessed Lazarus being raised from the dead. Later she was in Bethany at the home of the other Mary and Martha and Lazarus when Jesus was anointed with spikenard – one of the oils used to prepare the dead for burial. Mary had accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem when the crowds cried hosanna as he came into the city on a colt. She was close at hand when the authorities were looking for him after his triumphant entry into the Holy City. Then the Lord withdrew from her and them all. He knew that the time had come for him to go to his Father in heaven. He had tried to prepare his disciples. I wonder if Mary understood. I wonder if we would have understood what it was all about? Their last night together her master, her teacher – her everything – washed the disciples’ feet and taught them to be servants to each other. Then they came together to share supper – their last Passover meal together. Jesus gave them a new commandment that they were to love one another. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁸ Mary Magdalene must have thought: “I don’t know how to love like he loves.” “What’s it all about?” Jesus promised her and the other disciples that he would not leave them alone, that he would send them the Holy Spirit so that they could continue his work. In his farewell discourse to the disciples, Mary had heard Jesus make what she thought of as unrealistic promises. But did Mary understand all this? No! What was it all about?

Mary knew she loved him because he had taught all the disciples how to love. But she didn't really know how to express her love for him. Jesus told his Father that the world didn't know him, but all the disciples and Mary and his other women followers knew God because they knew him. He had loved them the way that he was loved by God. He taught them that extraordinary extravagant love.

Was she in the garden across the Kidron valley with Jesus and the other disciples? We do not know from Scripture, but surely she came to know what it was all about when she learned of Jesus's arrest and trial and sentence? Did Mary Magdalene watch as Jesus dragged that cruel piece of wood to Golgotha where he was crucified on a cross like a common criminal.⁹ We do know that Mary Magdalene, along with Jesus's Mother Mary and his Aunt Mary waited, they waited at the foot of the cross for their love to die.

Thank you for journeying with Mary Magdalene the last week of his life on earth to experience "what it is all about" because the glory of the resurrection would mean little if we had not journeyed with Mary Magdalene and the other disciples. Easter Day would be just a sweet spring holiday with little more meaning than bunny rabbits and colored eggs and Easter Egg Hunts. Surely Easter is all that. It is a day to celebrate with beautiful white and gold vestments in the church. But my friends, we would not be celebrating today if Jesus had not been resurrected – if he had not been raised from the dead. There would be no church. Christianity would not exist.

Mary Magdalene's love and the joy that she experienced when Jesus appeared to her at the tomb is a testimony to Jesus's resurrection. But at first she wept at the tomb that Easter morning when she found her Lord's body gone. Mary Magdalene wept so much that she could not see through the tears. She cried and mourned the double loss of her Lord – his death and then his missing body. She was so lost without him that she didn't remember his telling her and the other disciples that they would "weep and mourn, but the world [would] rejoice" because they would see him again and "no one would be able to take away their joy."¹⁰ But she couldn't remember his words of comfort or feel his love

or be able to love him because he was gone. She wept because she didn't know "What it was all about?" Mary misunderstood. No one had taken Jesus away from his tomb; rather he had left death behind. But within moments Mary understood. The angels were not there to announce that Jesus has been resurrected. It was for Jesus himself to announce his resurrection. The heart of Mary Magdalene's story was when she met a "gardener" who repeated the angel's concern asking the question: "Woman, why are you weeping" and more importantly "Who are you looking for?"¹¹ When Jesus asked that question again, he called her by name: "Mary." Only then through her tears did Mary recognize the Risen Lord, and she responded in a familiar and loving way when she said "Rabbouni" meaning my Rabbi, my teacher. She must have thought 'Oh, my Lord, my sweet Lord, O, my Rabbouni! Now I know how to love you! You are my Rabbouni, the one who taught me how to love – how to love my neighbor, how to love all people, how to respect their dignity, and how to tell your story of love.'

We have concluded our journey to the empty tomb with Mary Magdalene. No longer do we wonder "What's it all about?" But we do have to answer the same question put to Mary Magdalene: "Who are we looking for?" That is the question that John puts to us this Easter Day. Who are we looking for? Are we looking for the One who can teach us to love? Do we want Jesus to teach us how to love? Can we love like Jesus loved? He was the perfect reflection of God's love. Are we to love like Jesus loved his own, like he loved his followers, like he loved Mary Magdalene, like she loved him? Mary made that love known as one of the first evangelists, taking the good news of the resurrection to everyone she met. And we too are to make that love known as we will promise when we renew our Baptismal covenants today.

Risen Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ We are Episcopalians here at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea, THE Episcopal Church in Destin, Florida, in the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, one of the 111 dioceses (regions) of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America that includes 17 nations outside our borders, and as such is part of the Worldwide Anglican Communion. Michael Curry the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church describes us as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement that began shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel according to John was written in the later part of the 1st century, and believers already were worshiping the risen Jesus as the Christ. The Jesus Movement had begun.

² William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Commentary on John 20, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/john-20.html>

³ Much of what we think we know about Mary Magdalene is based on legend, some are long held beliefs of the church that are fiction at best and disinformation at worst. One of the stories we think we know comes only from some traditions that are NOT found in Scripture; it is the story of Mary Magdalene as a tainted lady turned disciple of Jesus. To be clear, there is no Biblical foundation for the portrait of Mary Magdalene as a sinful woman. Many writers use this patristic and medieval version of Mary of Magdala that began with the church fathers who wanted to discredit a woman follower of Christ. Indeed many artists and playwrights have done the same, including Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and even my dear William Barclay. It is natural that we would merge legend and Scripture to get a clearer picture of Mary, just as we conflate all the versions of the Gospel versions. But I have found it best to stay with one version. In this case the post-Easter Gospel according to John.

⁴ Our Lord's body had been prepared lavishly for burial already using 100 pounds of spices brought by Nicodemus. So she didn't come to anoint him.

⁵ It was believed that for three days the spirit of the dead person hovered round the tomb; but then it departed because the body had become unrecognizable through decay.

⁶ To go to the tomb, to make that journey on the Sabbath would have been to break Jewish law. Our Sabbath is, of course, Saturday, so it would have been on Sunday morning that Mary came to the tomb.

⁷ Night was divided into four watches, and Mary came in the 4th watch between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. See William Barclay above.

⁸ See John 13: 34-35.

⁹ Crucifixion was a particularly horrific manner of death that the Romans had devised.

¹⁰ See John 16:20, 22.

¹¹ This is a repeat of Jesus's first words in the Gospel according to John "Who or what are you looking for?" See John 1:38.