

TITLE: "In the Garden"

TEXT: John 20:1-18 (NT pp. 114-115)

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. ²So 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."

³Then 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. ⁶Then 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 [folded] up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. 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, "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."

¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

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.

1. Thank you

While I was driving to the Syracuse airport a few weeks ago, one of the many news bites on the radio was that a couple hundred people had been killed by raiders in Nigeria, Africa. At the moment, I was concentrating on navigating through a detour so I could catch my flight, so I really didn't pay much attention.

The next day at the seminar I attended in Florida, all of the ministers introduced themselves. One said he was an Anglican Bishop from Africa. I memorized his name, which was Blessed, but after so many introductions, I must admit that I did not pay much attention to the details, such as where in Africa he was from.

The next day in class, the leader asked the Anglican Bishop if he had heard any more news about tragedy in his country. At that point, the news was that 500 Christians had been killed by Moslem raiders who had come down from northern Nigeria. This must have happened after he left Nigeria, because he hadn't heard about it and he left the conference room in a hurry with his cell phone in his hand.

When he returned, he told us that his wife had not wanted to call and disturb him at this important conference, but indeed there had been a raid and that one of his own sons, who was working in a clinic right in the middle of the carnage, was missing. The leader halted the class and we all prayed for the son and for Blessed and his family.

Blessed received calls and updates throughout the day and night. The next morning he came into the dining hall smiling and announced that his son had been found alive. Two of his son's colleagues at the clinic were killed, but he ran out into the bush and hid. Apart from being dehydrated, he was OK. The next day, I drove Blessed to the airport and he gave me all the details and it truly WAS a miracle that his son was alive.

I mention this because when we hear about tragedies in faraway places such as the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, the suffering may not seem real to us. But tragedies happen to real people who love their families, love their friends and are attached to their belongings just as we are.

So I want to thank you for giving to the relief efforts in Haiti, in Chile and giving to Heifer International and One Great Hour of Sharing. Even though we may never know in this lifetime how much our gifts have relieved their suffering, the Lord knows and the Lord appreciates what you have done. And I believe that someday you WILL meet some of those people in heaven and they will thank you as well.

2. Our resurrection

In our text for this morning we heard how Mary met the resurrected Jesus. Like Blessed's son who was lost and assumed dead, but then was found alive, there is no joy quite as intense as the joy that follows an almost certain tragedy! So we can only imagine the joy Mary experienced when she went to the garden expecting to find a corpse and instead seeing the risen Jesus and hearing him say her name, "Mary!"

Let me tell you a story I received by email a couple weeks ago:

Why did Jesus fold the linen burial cloth after His resurrection?

The text this morning tells us that when Simon Peter arrived and went inside the tomb, he noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered the face of Jesus, was not just thrown aside like the grave clothes. The Bible takes an entire verse to tell us that the napkin was folded up neatly and put carefully in a place by itself.

In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, you have to understand a little bit about Hebrew tradition of that day. The folded napkin had to do with the master and servant, and every Jewish boy knew this tradition.

When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished.

Now if the master were done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, "I'm finished."

But if the master got up from the table, and carefully folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table. Why?

.....Because the folded napkin meant, "I'm coming back!"

Jesus DID come back. One of the joys of Easter is knowing that we who have faith in Jesus will die as Jesus died and we will come back to life just as Jesus came back to life. And when we do, we will never die again, and we will live with Jesus forever.

In I Corinthians 15, we read:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory?"

What an experience that will be when our mortal bodies are transformed into spiritual bodies that will live forever, and we meet the Lord face to face and Jesus greets us as he did Mary, opens his arms and welcomes us by name.

3. In the garden

In our text, four things happened when Mary met Jesus alone in the garden.

Mary spoke to Jesus,
 Jesus addressed Mary by name,
 Jesus told Mary what he was doing and
 Jesus told Mary what she was to do.

You too need to spend time alone with Jesus. It doesn't have to be in a literal garden. You can meet Jesus anyplace; in a bedroom or living room, on a walk during lunch hour, a few moments before bed, during a study period at school. Jesus WANTS to hear from you and you can tell Jesus each worry and concern that you have.

Just as Jesus lovingly spoke Mary's name, so will Jesus let you know how much he loves you and cares for you. The very hairs of your head are numbered. When you spend time with Jesus in prayer, he will let you know just how MUCH you are loved, personally, uniquely and deeply.

Just as Jesus told Mary that he would soon be ascending to heaven, so too will Jesus let you know what he is doing. Jesus has done a lot with those in our church over the past 200+ years. Jesus is doing a lot right now in our midst. Things like feeding hungry kids here in Dryden, repairing our church building, holding retreats for women, having a Mardi Gras meal for Haiti relief, putting in a new sound system and starting a Mothers of Preschoolers program. This is an exciting time to be part of our church!

None of this would be happening if people in this church were not listening to Jesus. Just as Jesus told Mary to go and tell the disciples that she had seen Jesus, so too is Jesus telling people in our church what they are to do. And as Mary did what Jesus told her to do, so are you doing what Jesus tells you to do. And new things are happening. And I am very excited about the adventures that lie ahead for our congregation!

I have been reading the book *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel. Lee has a journalism degree from the University of Missouri and a Masters of studies in Law degree from Yale Law School and was the legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune* for many years. He was a spiritual skeptic until 1981 when he met Jesus Christ. He wrote *The Case for Christ* to present concrete historical evidence that Jesus is the Son of God.

In the book he writes about Louis S. Lapidus. Louis grew up in a Jewish Family. Looking back Louis said, "...in Judaism I didn't feel as if I had a personal relationship with God. I had a lot of beautiful ceremonies and traditions, but was distant and detached from God." [Many growing up in a Christian family have had the same experience.]

As an adult, Louis met a pastor who gave him a Bible and told him to read the Old Testament and ask God to show him if Jesus is the Messiah. He was very skeptical, but he finally did. One day he was reading Isaiah 53, which goes:

⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

As soon as Louis read this, he knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. Yet at that point, he was still unwilling to ask Jesus into his life.

Then one day he and some friends travelled into the desert. Louis went off by himself and prayed. He writes:

The best I can put together out of that experience is that God objectively spoke to my heart. He convinced me, experientially, that he exists. And at that point, out in the desert, in my heart I said, “God, I accept Jesus into my life. I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do with him, but I want him. I’ve pretty much made a mess of my life; I need you to change me.”

And [years later] he says:

And God began to do that in a process that continues to this day. My friends knew that my life had changed, and they couldn’t understand it. They’d say, “Something happened to you in the desert. You don’t want drugs anymore. There’s something different about you.”

I would say, “Well, I can’t explain what happened. All I know is that there’s someone in my life, and it’s someone who’s holy, who’s righteous, who’s a source of positive thoughts about life—and I just feel whole. ... *Whole* in a way I had never felt before.”

Louis Lapidus met Jesus Christ alone in the desert. Mary met Jesus alone in the garden. Both had an experience that transformed their lives. C. Austin Miles must also must have had such experiences because he wrote the words and music to one of the most beloved of our hymns, “In the Garden”. It goes:

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.

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.

Jesus is waiting for you to meet him in the garden of your life. If you make the time to meet with Jesus, Jesus will soothe your fears, tell you how MUCH he loves you, let you know what he is doing and give you guidance and direction for your life. And, if you take the time to tarry with Jesus in the garden, you too will find the most wonderful joy you have ever known.

Amen.

Let us sing that together: #425 “In the Garden.”