

Easter!... in July?  
Sermon 147 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 24, 2022  
John 20:1-18

In case you are in the rhythm of reading the scriptures to prepare for worship each Sunday, you may have thought there was a misprint in last week's e-news announcing the reading for today. We even had one astute parishioner call the office to make sure we'd listed it correctly saying, "I just want to be sure I've got the right text!"

I asked the question myself when I came upon the Gospel selection for this Sunday in Dr. Wilda Gafney's *Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W*, a resource I've been using all year for worship planning. Really? A resurrection account halfway through ordinary time? A little bit more reading led me to discover Gafney's reasoning for including this text on this day.

This day, at least according to the liturgical calendar, is not an ordinary Sunday at all, rather, it is the day we celebrate the Feast of Mary Magdalene. It is a day of celebration and discovery as Christians around the world are invited to turn our attention to the unique and critical role that Mary plays in the Gospels and in the life of Jesus.

In terms of traditional Christian feast days, this one is relatively new. Like Juneteenth has only been a recognized federal holiday for two years now, the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene has only been recognized since 2016 when Pope Francis elevated the status of this beloved saint by honoring her with a full day of celebration.

Now, I've said it before and I'll say it again, we are good Baptists and we do not tie ourselves to the pope or even the liturgical calendar for that matter. But we do profess to be "Easter people," right? So what's the harm in revisiting the Easter story... even if it is the middle of July?

And, we are Cooperative Baptists which means that one of our founding statements, one of our core beliefs is that God calls women to serve God and the church in every office, that God equips them with the same unique callings, and that it is right and good for the church to affirm those gifts when they present themselves, listening to the word of God as it is delivered through the lips of men and women. As the prophet Amos says, we too profess that our *sons and daughters will prophesy*. So what's the harm in spending one day, one hour, on Mary and her role in the Gospel?

She is, after all, affectionately called the *Apostle to the Apostles*. She earns this title because she is the first to the tomb on Easter morn and the first thing she does – even before she fully understands what has happened – the first thing she does is go and tell. She is the first to announce that the stone has been rolled away; hers is the voice that summons the others to come and see, and her name is the first that rolls off the tongue of our resurrected Lord. Yes, Mary Magdalene is the first observer, the first recipient, and the first evangelist of the Good News.

As is often the case with news, the others aren't sure what to make of Mary's account. Neither dismissing her nor taking her at her word, they investigate the facts for themselves, running to the tomb, walking inside, touching the strips of cloth that once wrapped the body of Jesus, before verifying for themselves that Mary was right after all: Jesus is not where they left him.

Mary's emphatic proclamation carries the text from one movement to the next as she repeats: *They have taken our Lord and we do not know where they have laid him!*

Each utterance is a crescendo leading to the moment near the end when the other disciples have returned home but she remains... weeping by the tomb. There she stands, deflated, exhausted, and abandoned in her grief.

There in her solitary experience of a new reality, the Gardener speaks her name, and everything she must have been feeling, thinking, weeping, and worrying about all became clear. Jesus isn't there, in the tomb, wrapped up nice and tidy as they left him. Jesus is HERE, in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty. Jesus is there, in the garden, standing amongst the foliage and calling Mary by name.

Throughout the scripture and especially in John's Gospel the garden is a special and spiritual place. This Gospel takes every opportunity to bring the reader back to the Genesis stories of creation as if to remind us that the Garden can be both Gethsemane and Eden often at the same time. It can be a place of unruly chaos, crisis, and turmoil, but it can also be a place of creation and renewal.

*[Could John be hinting at that here? Is that why Jesus' first resurrection encounter happens here, where Jesus is mistaken for the gardener? Is Mary going to experience a re-creation of her own?]*

If this is indeed a moment like that... a moment of re-creation, of new life, not only for Jesus but also for Mary, all the right elements are there. There is darkness: Mary arrives in the morning before the sun has come up just as creation begins when God arrives and hovers over the darkness. There is chaos, we can feel it in Mary's voiced refrain: *they have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him*. There is possibility: the body is gone, but wait, didn't Jesus say this would happen?

And if we are indeed dealing with the God of Genesis (and John believes that we are) then we have already witnessed that God can breathe life into mere dust. Yes, it feels rather wild now, but this wild is pregnant with possibility.

The Gospel reader knows it, we've seen it coming from the first verse: *In the beginning, was the Word...* but Mary does not know it yet. She is living the story in real-time, her ending is yet to be written.

Mary waits in the wild, weeping for the loss of her friend, her teacher, her Lord, her plans, her expectations, her future...her everything.

*They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.*

Though this tends to be an Easter story, and though Mary Magdalene tends to be a marginal character for us, this feeling, this position, her heartfelt refrain from this desolate spiritual location beckons us all to sit with her, weeping beside all the many kinds of graves we encounter in life.

You know a grave can be a literal grave, a place to bury our dead. But that's not the only kind of grave. There are other kinds as well... tombs we encounter in the gardens of our own lives, places where our plans, our dreams, and our expectations go to die.

Sometimes they look like the end of a career, the loss of income, a broken relationship, or a failed attempt. At times they take the shape of a dream deferred or an uninvited change. Envy, addiction, selfishness, greed, and all kinds of sin can entice and entrap us, begging us to hold on tightly to the things that promise life but ultimately usher us to the grave. They can be large-scale and small-scale, individual and collective. They can arrive in an instant or they can be built slowly (almost without notice) over time. They promise us a bit of certainty, (oh yes) but rob the power, the promise, the wonder, and the mystery of the resurrection.

So when life brings us to the garden, we sit right there with Mary and weep for all that never was, for promises broken, for expectations shattered, for certainty lost, and for dreams that will never be realized.

Yesterday we gathered to celebrate the life of our beloved sister in Christ, Fran Black. Fran was born 99 years ago, in 1923! As I thought about her life this week I thought about all the things that she saw and experienced and must have felt... war and depression, uncertainty and unrest; she experienced birth

and death and moves and unprecedented changes in the world, in the church, in her life, and in the lives of the people she loved. Surely, she knew what it was to sit by the tomb and weep... but if you knew Fran at all, you knew that she was an Easter person.

One of the most remarkable things about Fran Black was her “What’s Next?” approach to life. No matter what was changing around her, within her, or in relationship to her...she accepted what *was*, faced it head on, and moved forward with trust that God was going to take care of her.

Many of us here saw her live this truth in the final years of her life and even during the pandemic. She didn’t look back and succumb to nostalgia, wishing things could be as they once were. Instead, she accepted the current situation - recognizing her feelings about things of course, but never allowing them to shape her path forward.

Some years ago, when it became clear that it was time to leave Pennsylvania and move down here to be close to Becky, Fran accepted this reality for what it was. She and her husband, Robert, had built the house and lived in it for fifty years and there was a lot of life that unfolded within its walls. It would have been understandable for one to drag her feet, lament, or even resist, but not Fran!

She worked with the family to sell the house, pack the car, and hit the road to Raleigh. The most amazing thing is, as Becky remembers it, they pulled out of the driveway that last time, and Fran never looked back. Her eyes were set on the road ahead - and she was enjoying it - excited about what was next!

And I believe she found the courage to be excited about her unknown future, about leaving everything she *knew* behind, because of her faith that where God was leading, there would be new life.  
Any other place would just be a grave.

Fran probably learned to recognize the voice of God leading her into this wild and unknown future because of the relationship with God that they had built together her whole life.

In much the same way, the Gardener calls Mary by name and immediately she knows the voice, she knows whom it is calling out to her from beyond the tomb... As soon as he says her name, she calls out his, *Rabbouni*. We imagine that they embrace there in the garden, and then Jesus says, "Do not hold onto me...but go and tell the others"

And so Mary does just that. She gets up, she leaves the grave behind, and she becomes the Apostle to the Apostles: "I have seen the Lord!"

As she does this, she is freed from all the fear, the grief, and the worry she brought with her to the tomb that day. She is able to release all of her old expectations because her encounter with Christ offered something new, something better, a way forward that she could never have imagined because – well, it had never been done before.

This is why it's so important that we remember we are *Easter* people... even in July!

Because in this life, we know there will be pain. We know there will be grief. We know there will be brokenness and despair. We know that there will be times when it feels the world is crashing down all around us.

And maybe THIS is one of those times for us.

And if it is, then maybe we are asking: *Where are you, God?*

Echoing the refrain of Mary Magdalene all those years ago: *They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they've put him*. But Jesus wasn't there, because his story, God's story, does not end in a grave.

There is always hope! And this is not a superficial hope that bypasses the gravity and chaos of grief. This is a hope that is born out of searching, sitting, and weeping by the graves that characterize the human experience. This is a hope that is willing to recognize that things will never be the same as they were, This is a hope that is resurrected from and within the chaos of the garden, with the voice of Christ calling out our name and offering a new path forward.

Wendell Berry has a poem called, *The Peace of Wild Things*, it goes like this:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting for their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

Perhaps this is why we need Easter in July, perhaps this is why the testimony of Mary, Apostle to the Apostles, is so important for us today -

Because despair for the world is growing... And we all need some good news.

So maybe we can all take a step toward the Garden... Knowing full well that it can be both Gethsemane and Eden... But also knowing that if we can rest in the grace of God, if we can allow ourselves to hear the voice of God

beckoning us forward, into whatever is next... We can be sure that there, in Christ, we are being set free.