

Barbara & Chuck Blaisdell
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
April 24, 2011 Easter Sunday

The Gardener (John 20:11-18)

(John 20:11-18 NRSV) "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.

Chuck: Imagine with me a hillside garden in early spring. The sun, rising earlier and earlier each day, dapples the distant peaks in a panoply of purples, yet the early morning dawn is still crisp and cold. There is a woman in that garden, standing outside of a dark cave. She is distraught, eyes swollen from tears - and she is talking to a gardener. Such a scene is the first Easter morning as the Gospel of John portrays it. And it is that portrayal that inspired Rembrandt's painting of this first Easter morning, there in that chilly garden. A copy is on your bulletin cover. Rembrandt painted that gardener to whom the woman is talking wearing a big, floppy hat. In his hand is a spade and in his belt a pruning knife. The woman is Mary Magdalene. The gardener is none other than Jesus, the risen Christ.

Barbara: John tells us that Mary Magdalene went early Sunday morning to that cave in that garden, where the body of Jesus had been placed, to prepare that

blessed body for burial. And so it would turn out that she would be the first to realize he was actually alive and the first, then, to proclaim the story of Easter. In this sense, she is our mother in the faith, one who, like us, must search amidst life's hard, hard things and yet who also wants to believe in a world with hope, wants to trust in this gospel of the risen Christ, this gospel where love really can conquer evil and death. So there is something about joining her there in that lovely, cold garden to see how Easter came to her, to see how and why she came to search – and then to believe and to trust in the risen Christ – that can also describe us. That's what we'd like us to do in the next few minutes: to join with Mary Magdalene by dawn's first light in that chilly garden on that first Easter morning.

But in order to do so, if your imagination is like mine, you need to be able to picture her: What does she look like? Who is this Mary? Well, probably many of us have long-pictured her as a young, attractive ex-prostitute who was in love with Jesus. I suspect that this image has staying power in our culture because of our fascination with romance. But there is no scriptural evidence for this picture of Mary Magdalene. The New Testament actually only tells us two things about her: first, that Jesus helped her be healed of a terrible spiritual and mental illness, and that she was part of a small group of women who financed the ministry of Jesus. Which is to say, while it is possible that she was young, it is much more likely that she was an older woman with some accumulated wealth, retired and therefore freed from the responsibilities of work and family, free to travel with Jesus and to support his ministry.

Picture her as young and fresh-faced if you prefer. But for this Easter morning, you might try seeing her with a few lovely wisdom-lines on her face and with a few well-

earned grey hairs. Whatever her actual age, on this particular morning she looks older, tired, worn down, face shadowed with sorrow. Rembrandt paints her this way: her face sallow with days of weeping, her eyes puffy and red, her limbs hanging heavily, her body bent with a great grief. **Because there are some losses that are too great to bear.** She had been given back her mental health by Jesus, but the events of this week have threatened to take it away from her again. She's tottering on the very edge of sanity because **He** of all people is dead. Dead – and much too young for death. A death that was cruel and tortured and hours in coming under the brutal sun on that accursed cross. And now, on this icy cold morning, she has discovered that apparently some cruel, evil person has broken into his tomb and taken away his corpse, taking from her the last earthly thing she could do for him. Are there no limits to the evils of this world?

Is it any wonder then, that she breaks down, collapsing onto the ground, sobbing with a broken heart. Why? Because death is so final. Because evil is so viciously persistent. Because when we are suffering as Mary is suffering, we cannot make sense of all the pain. Listen: this isn't crazy hysterics that Magdalene is going through. This is a woman who has come to understand the truth about death and evil in the world. And the appropriate response to that is indeed tears.

 Chuck: My friends, this is where Easter begins. It is only by coming to despair over this world's suffering that you and I become eligible for Easter. It is appropriate despair and tears over the truth about death and the reality of evil that make us eligible for Easter. For that is where Easter begins. And what that means is this: If you have come to this sanctuary on this Easter morning with only happiness in your heart, you

may not need the resurrection story. The flowers and the music and the crowd may be enough. And if so, then thanks be to God! But if – underneath the pretty new clothes and the bright smile – you have come to church this day with some sadness, some secret pain, some hollow loneliness, some deep questions or bewilderment that reach to the very core of your being and threatens to undo you, if you have brought some hurting with you and have been feeling left out of this party called Easter – then you need to know that it is most of all for **you** who hurt, you who have known too much of the world's evil, that this celebration is meant. Because the people who are most eligible for Easter **are those whose hearts know hurt and pain and suffering.** *And I suspect this is where most of us are, really, for we don't get very far into life before hurt and suffering come to visit.* The trouble is, of course, that it is exactly people with broken hearts who find it most difficult to believe in hope and who don't see it when it comes. When your heart is broken, you're always slow to grasp that there is hope. Look again at Rembrandt's Mary, for example. She stands staring into a tomb. What sadder way could there be to greet the dawning day? But as she stands there staring, she begins to see two people. (John calls them angels but Mary doesn't see them that way. She sees them as intruders.) *"Woman, why are you weeping?"* they ask.

Barbara: ***"Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where to find him!"*** She turns and she runs and she nearly collides into a third stranger. John says it's Jesus, but Mary can't see that - yet. She has tears in her eyes and a raging storm in her heart and she does not see Jesus. She thinks that he's the gardener.

Chuck: And he now asks with the gentlest warmth in his voice, *"Woman, why*

are you weeping?" And to that question he adds another one: *"Whom are you looking for?"* This is the **third** time in John's gospel that Jesus asks this question. It's the question he had asked of two would-be disciples when they wanted to follow him: *"Who and what are you looking for?"* It's the same question he had asked just two nights before when Judas brought those soldiers to seize him: *"Who are you looking for?"* And it's the same question that He asks of each and every one of us: *"Who and what are you looking for?"*

Barbara: It was a kind and gentle voice that asked Mary that question. But Mary could not hear the love and warmth in that voice. In the depths of her despair she can only suspect him of evil. Cold hostility in her voice, she replies: ***"Sir, if you have taken him, please, PLEASE tell me."***

My friends, that is how Easter comes: when we are so frozen in bad news that we cannot feel the warmth of the good news, when we are so hypnotized by the relentless rhythm of suffering that we cannot hear the cadences of beauty. Here is Mary Magdalene, so fixed on a dead Jesus that she cannot see the risen Christ standing right next to her, calling her by name. // Look very carefully at her face, that suffering face. Have you not seen it before? In the face of the dirty, disheveled man sleeping in the street? Or in the face of your co-worker who's in the middle of a messy crisis at home? Or in the face of a friend, standing too close to death? Perhaps you have seen that face in your own mirror. If so, has your private pain been doing to you what Mary's sorrow was doing to her? Is it possible that in your hurting, you've been stumbling over angels who have come to tell you great news? In your suffering, have you been oblivious to the One who stands right beside you now, offering real hope, asking you to

look deep within, asking, "*Who or what are you really looking for?*"

If the Easter message has seemed distant or hollow or hard to believe, given how much you have been hurting, the good news is that it may be closer to you now than you think, waiting for you to blink back the tears long enough to see who has come to stand beside you, to call you by your name.

Chuck: He comes to us in today's story as a gardener. Mary mistook him for a gardener. But Rembrandt clearly believed that Mary was **not** mistaken in seeing him that way. And it is no accident that the gospel writer uses this image of Jesus for his first resurrection appearance. After all, it is John's gospel that begins with the same phrase as the first creation story: "*In the beginning...*" John claims that Christ was there in that very first creation story, there with God when God first planted the garden that was to be this world, a world that was meant by God to indeed be a beautiful garden. God never meant that garden, that world to be a place of suffering. **God does not do evil!** But sin slithered in and coiled around our lives and chaos came crashing 'round. And yet, John claims, on that chilly dawning morning, the Gardener has not abandoned us but stands beside us and ***calls us by our name.***

That is what John is trying to tell us: that when the risen Christ blows the doors off the tombs of death and walks back into the world, he does so with names on his lips, the names of people he knows well enough to live for, well enough to die for, well enough to live within. The first words spoken on an Easter morning from the risen Christ are your name, your name! When you hear your own name called like that from one who knows you so well and loves you so much, then you can dare to live again and love again.

So, my friends, if you are one who has ever suffered and doubted, if you are one who has ever questioned God, if you are one who has ever stood staring into a tomb of despair, then hear this news: Christ is alive this day, calling your name, offering to you new life, new hope, and faith. Mary heard him whisper, disguised as a gardener. How will you hear him this morning? For he is here, he **IS** here whispering your name. Thanks be to God, He IS here and He Is Risen!