

Seek and Ye Shall Find: Easter in the Garden

Dr Catherine Cavanagh

Wall Street United Church – April 5th 2026

John 20:1-18 from the New International Version.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is it, my friends.

The most luminous day of the Christian calendar. Alleluia!

A day of celebration, of rejoicing, of remembering.

And yet, John's Easter story does not begin in certainty.

It begins in darkness. It begins in grief. It begins in misunderstanding.

The tomb is empty, but no one yet knows what that means. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Even resurrection first arrives clothed in confusion. That's the human condition.

I treasure that honesty in the Gospel witness! Easter morning is not told as an easy triumph. The Gospels do not rush past grief or doubt. They tell the truth about what it means to be human: sometimes it is hard to recognize God, even when God is standing right in front of us.

And perhaps some of us know something about that.

Many of us have walked through seasons where hope seemed hidden, where love felt absent, where God seemed just beyond our sight. Like Mary, like Peter, like the beloved disciple, we have known what it is to search in the dark. And the telling of their search comes to us a little differently depending on which Gospel we read.

Each Gospel tells the morning a little differently—not contradictions, but variations on a theme, the same holy truth carried by different communities, across years and miles, by word of mouth and faithful memory.

And the Church, in its wisdom, kept all four. I love that! Because scripture is not a single voice speaking from on high. Scripture is a conversation about God and with God, across time and with each other, a witness held in community, a chorus rather than a solo.

It makes room for different experiences of resurrection. Some come to belief quickly. Some need time. Some arrive through tears. Some through wonder. Some through the voice that calls us by name.

This morning, John's Gospel draws us especially close to Mary Magdalene and to her searching. She keeps seeking even after the stone is rolled away. She keeps searching

even after the others leave. She refuses to let absence be the final word. I find that intriguing! And so this morning, I want us to enter that story with her. I want us to explore this from her personal perspective which may teach us something about ours.

There is an ancient Jewish practice called *midrash*—a retelling of scripture that stretches the imagination so we may see what the heart sometimes misses. And this Easter morning, I want to offer you a kind of midrash of Mary's search: a story that seeks the heart of what we heard, beyond the details. A story that begins in grief and ends in joy too deep for words.

Because God does not come only for Mary. God comes for us.

So come with me now into the garden. Let us begin!

Midrash

Long before dawn Mary strides through the garden, searching for the cave, the tomb, while the gardener stands motionless, waiting for her. Only his eyes travel, kindly, gently, while her feet stumble on the path.

She shivers. The chill of the Judean night gives no hint of the warmth of Judean days.

They told her not to come, those friends, those disciples of his. They told her not to risk it. But she will not be denied. Not now. Not ever.

They may hide. There is good reason to. She will not.

It takes an eternity to find the cave with a flickering lamp. And the jar full of oil to anoint the dead weighs heavily in her arms.

She presses on until at last a deeper dark rises before her, a cleft where there should be rock. Someone has moved the entrance stone to the tomb! She is grateful. She leans gingerly into the hole, dreading and hoping, and her light dances against the rock. She steps closer, then gasps. The shadow of a crumpled linen trembles alone in the candlelight.

She finds the cave empty, silent, abandoned. He is not there. Jesus is not there! There is no one, nothing, just a gaping emptiness in the rock and in her heart. How can this be?

She cannot hold the pain alone. So she runs. Through the dim moonlit night, through the dark streets, to the place where they have gathered together—those who loved him, those who followed, those who fled. It is not far.

She finds Peter, and the one whom Jesus loved, the Beloved Disciple. Breathless, urgent, Mary tells them: the stone, the emptiness, the absence where his body should be.

And faster than grief, faster than hope, together they run toward the tomb.

They see the linen.

They take in the silence.

They stand at the edge of mystery, where death no longer makes sense and life has not yet revealed itself. And maybe they believe. So easily, so immediately. It is like that for some people. But not Mary.

But then? The two disciples leave. They go back into hiding. Maybe they believe in the Resurrection, but it does not quiet their fears. It does not answer their questions, questions that it does not feel safe enough to ask. And we understand that, for we too have fears and questions.

Mary watches them go, watches as they disappear into the dark, their footsteps fading away towards a world without Jesus, a world Mary cannot yet face. Yes, there is eternal life ... but it is not the same when someone dies.

She bows her head. It isn't possible! It has been so hard; the hope shattered by his death, her own new beginning cut off, ending as he took a last struggling breath on that monstrosity of wood. She allows her tears to fall, disappearing into the darkness at her feet.

Time passes, silent, endless in the loneliness of the cave.

At last she places her hand on the cool stone, and feels courage flow towards her from the yawning hole behind. A vestige left from him perhaps. Or a gift from an angel.

She raises her head, strengthens her resolve. She will not allow this to be the end, nor concede this moment to defeat. Freed by his hand of seven demons, her heart will no longer be contained. She has already won this battle for her soul. But it is hard.

She thinks, breathes deeply, remembers his words: *“Seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given to you”*. She deposits the now useless jar of oil, senses the new lightness in her arms, the freedom to move, and peers into the darkness of the garden.

There was a presence hiding out there earlier, she thinks ... a light behind the trees. The gardener! She turns and moves back along the path, pushing aside bushes, scrambling through hedges. Where is that gardener? Where is that man?

It never occurs to her to walk away, that the search may be futile. The seeking itself creates a strange alchemy; it builds her strength, turns sorrow to hope, transforms grief to fire.

And when the fire is burning like a watch fire in the night, when it is flaming in her belly like a sacrificial pyre, He is before her, rising out of the mist, surfacing from her dreams, this gardener, this keeper of God’s creation, this caregiver of fragile earth.

She cries, she demands, *“Why have they stolen him? Where have they taken him? What have you done to him?”*

For a moment, there, in the greyness of rising dawn, he says nothing, savouring this instant, delaying this hoped-for resolution, which for three days has kept him from infinity, held him back from the temptation of nothingness, held him there, not by power, but by love—
by the memory of faces,
by the echo of voices,
by the stubborn, fragile hope
that they would come.

Now, humanity has come to him, he who was beaten, dead, and lost.

Here stands the evidence of faith, the truth of resurrection, the revelation of God, the hope of all tomorrows. He would not force himself on them, but he would invite, he would call. He would open wide his arms for all the world and invite them in.

And so He calls softly the word on his heart, in his soul, to this faithful disciple: *“Mary.”*

And she knows! She understands. Even before the first rays of sun break across the horizon, even before the first bird launches into song, even before the first waft of heat and light hit his face, she knows.

The later storytellers will relate how she prostrated before him, how she called him '*Teacher*', how she went forth to spread his message. But for an atomic measure of time, an eternity of existence, heaven stood before earth, God stood before mortal, and hope bound itself to love in one enduring embrace.

This is our story, my friends. This is *our* story. That embrace holds us still. Each one of us. Now and for always.

Happy Easter! Amen.