

**Easter Sunday**  
**April 4, 2021**  
**“The Garden of Joy”**  
**A Sermon Based on John 20:1-18**  
**By Rev. Ruth Ragovin**



Jesus Appearing to Mary Magdalene following His Resurrection by John Bateson

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One of the most beloved hymns in the 20<sup>th</sup> century begins with these familiar words “**I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses ...**” Written by C. Austin Miles, it is a ballad written in the voice and from the perspective of Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ most devout follower, perhaps even the first among Jesus’ disciples, always at his side, one of the only ones whose faith did not falter, whose devotion to him never wavered, whose heart had been broken wide open as she journeyed with him through the streets of Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna! Save us!” that quickly turned to cries of “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” as he was arrested, unjustly condemned, betrayed, mocked and ridiculed, flogged, and forced to carry his cross on his beaten and weakened body to Golgotha, also known as The Place of the Skull, where, nailed to a cross, he died as a common criminal between two thieves.

John’s Gospel tells us that as Jesus was dying on the cross five people courageously stayed with him. The beloved disciple who wrote the Gospel of John, Jesus’ mother Mary, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene had hearts that were big and courageous enough to witness and share his pain as they “held space” for him as he suffered. They heard his final anguished laments to God. They must have felt helpless as he cried out with parched lips that he was thirsty. They witnessed his final breath and side being pierced. They wept when his beaten body was taken down from the cross. Tradition has it that Jesus’ mother Mary held her dead son in her arms, weeping, cradling him—depicted in pictures and statues known as the Pietà. Mary Magdalene was there by Mary’s side, grieving, weeping, wailing, beating her breasts, inconsolable. Words cannot do justice to their shock and heart wrenching pain, their inconsolable grief in having witnessed their beloved Jesus being executed.

As it grew darker that Friday, two men arrived and joined the women and the beloved disciple: Nicodemus and a wealthy secret disciple of Jesus named Joseph from the town of Arimathea, who owned a tomb in an adjacent garden in which he wanted to place the body of Jesus. They took Jesus down from the cross and together they lovingly embalmed his body with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, according to the Jewish custom. They then wrapped Jesus with spices in linen cloths and carried his body to a Garden where they laid him in a tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Who knows how long they lingered there before a stone was rolled in front of the tomb. They were exhausted, terrified, and unable to bear the thought of living without him. Dread set in as they now faced a future without hope. At some point they managed to drag themselves away from the Garden where Jesus’ dead body lay in a sealed tomb.

Saturday passed. Mary Magdalene it seems lay awake as midnight turned into Sunday. Something compelled her to go out into the dark and dangerous streets to return to that Garden. She went all alone, something unheard of and dangerous for a woman at the time. Perhaps God was whispering in her ear: Mary, go to the garden where the tomb is. Mary, don't be afraid. Come! Love compelled her to walk alone through those streets of Jerusalem, out the gate, up the hill, past the place where bodies may still have been rotting on crosses, to the garden where Jesus lay in a tomb. **“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses ...”** Mary might have said.

Have you ever gone outside before the sun is up, with dew glistening on the grass or on the flowers. The dew was still on the roses. Roses are a symbol for paradise. Mary entered the garden, drawn by the voice of love deep within her soul, needing to be near the body of the one she loved more than anyone. He might be buried, but her devotion to him had not changed.

#### **VERSE #1**

♪ **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. ♪**

John 20:1 states that ***“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.”*** How unsettling it must have been for Mary to find the stone sealing the tomb to have been removed. Where was Jesus' body? Had his enemies stolen it? Was this to be the final insult added to injury? Surely fear and confusion gripped her soul as she ran to process this strange news with Simon Peter and the other disciple. The scriptures say: ***“So 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.’”*** (Jn 20: 2)

Peter and the other disciple must have been very startled by this bewildering news. They raced off to the garden to see for themselves whether what Mary Magdalene said was true. The scriptures say: *<sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.* (Jn 20:3-10)

Note how these two disciples—Simon Peter and the other disciple—reacted. Even though they had just witnessed something extremely unsettling, they just went back to things as usual. Instead of staying and waiting it out to see what would happen in the garden, they returned to their homes, the security of their familiar surroundings and ways of understanding things where there was a sense of certainty, order, structure, tradition. A universe where God doesn't intervene in miraculous ways. A world in which death has the final say. They retreated to a place where they could go in and shut the door behind them: the door of their minds, the door of their hearts, the door which, if left open, would have allowed them more easily to receive the great Truth, the altering of the entire universe, the move from a retributive, punitive understanding of seeing God and others to a compassionate way of living and being, a dismantling of the barriers between the finite and the infinite, earth and heaven.

Yes, like so many of us, Simon Peter and the other disciple retreated to the safety of the known and familiar. But Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb. Mary did not return to the familiar. She kept the door of her mind and heart wide open as she lingered in the great mystery of the moment. Yes, with a heart that was broken. A heart that was afraid. And a mind that was confused. Yet she stayed at the tomb, fully embracing the confusion, her pain, her emptiness, and she wept. But then, having gathered her courage, she mustered up every ounce of strength she had within her and resolutely faced the truth head on. Still weeping, she peered inside the tomb. The scriptures continue: *<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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."*

*<sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). (Jn 20: 11-16)*

Did you notice that it was only when Jesus called Mary by name that she finally recognized who he was? As it says in John 10: ***“Jesus the Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out and they follow him because they know his voice”*** (Jn 10:3-4) When Jesus called Mary by name she wasn't just hearing her name. He called her as one who knew her intimately, as one who knew her deepest essence, her soul. Soul called out to soul. There could be no mistaking who it was who was calling out to her with such sweetness.

## **VERSE #2**

**♪ He speaks, and the sound of His voice,  
is so sweet the birds hush their singing,  
and the melody that He gave to me,  
within my heart is ringing.**

**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. ♪**

After experiencing the sweetness of having her name called out, listen to what the scriptures say what happened next: *<sup>17</sup>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 sisters] and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”* (Jn 20:17)

Go, Jesus told Mary! Go Mary Go! Go tell my brothers! Go tell my sisters! Go tell the world! Go tell them in Murray, KY! Tell them I am returning to our Father! Tell them I am returning to our God! Go and tell! Proclaim the good news of the resurrection! Mary was the first whom he called to proclaim the resurrection! God chose her among all the people living on earth at that time to spread the news that death could not hold him.

God trusted her with the message that love is stronger than death! And after this life there is more life!

**VERSE #3**

♪ I'd stay in the garden with Him,  
though the night around me be falling,  
but He bids me go, through the voice of woe,  
his voice to me is calling.

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 called out to Mary to “Go and tell!” And what did she do? <sup>18</sup>*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.* (Jn 20:18) As Mary looked into the tomb designed to hold the dead, it was transformed into a womb from which new life emerged. The tomb in which Jesus was buried became a womb as Jesus was born as the risen Christ! “I have seen the Lord!” Mary announced with a heart full of conviction.

Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb while it was still dark, but now the Son was risen. “Christ the Lord has risen today! Alleluia!” Isn’t that the message of Easter when you come down to it? That love is stronger than death! That there is a spiritual power that takes hold of our consciousness and our world that is stronger than anything else. That God’s light can shine in any darkness. That nothing in *“all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom 8:39)! That in the midst of our darkness the Son always rises! There is promise. There is hope! Christ the Lord is risen today! After this life there is more life! And, this Easter Sunday, the high holy day of our Christian calendar and our lives, let us with our hearts filled with joy and gladness celebrate the heart of our Christian faith as we join our voices with the courageous Mary Magdalene and proclaim: “I have seen the Lord!” He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! And because he lives, we can face tomorrow!

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, we thank you that on this Easter Sunday, with Mary Magdalene we can move from the fear of death to the joy-filled radical hope of knowing that love is stronger than death and after this life there is more life. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who is risen today, Amen.