"The Resurrection of Our Lord"
John 20:1-18

March 31, 2002 -- Easter Sunday
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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I. Mary Magdalene

Look quietly, dear friends. There she is, weeping by the tomb. It's early in the morning, still dark. She's come with the other women as soon as they legally could, lugging the spices through the morning gloom in order to prepare the body for proper burial. These are devoted women, and there is little doubt that Mary Magdalene has a deep and godly love for her Lord. She has risked much to come to the tomb, but none of that really matters in the end.

The first thing she notices is that the stone has been removed from the tomb; her Lord's grave has been disturbed, and His body is no longer there. She quickly runs to Peter and John with the logical conclusion: "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter and John race to the tomb, and Peter bolts inside: It is empty, save for the burial cloths for the body and head. Those are neatly folded and set aside; whoever has removed the body has gone to a lot of extra trouble to unwrap the body and leave the linens there. But why? And who would do such a thing? John writes in the text that, by faith, he knows. But with nothing else to do, he and Peter go back home.

Mary Magdalene doesn't go anywhere-where is there to go after Jesus has died? She remains by the tomb to mourn; though when she peers into it, she finds herself facing two angels who ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She repeats, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Truly, this is a woman who dearly loves Jesus, and she will not be consoled at His passing.

Turning from the angels, she is confronted by a man-the gardener, she supposes. At least He might have some answers. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" He asks. "Sir," she replies, "if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Mary is devoted to her Lord, and she will not rest until she sees that His body has been properly cared for.

So, there Mary weeps by the tomb, a woman with great love for Jesus. She has witnessed His power, for it was He who delivered her from seven demons (Lk. 8:2). Even after His crucifixion, though many run away and hide, she will not. She remains faithful and devoted to the end, seeking to care for her Savior even after He has been put to death. We admire her love and devotion, and so we quietly leave her there to her grief and meditations.

Of course, if we do, we are going to have one lousy Easter. If we leave now, all we have is Mary weeping by the tomb. We have her example of devotion and love and mourning, it is true; but we still have no hope, because we have no resurrection from the dead.

Does it matter? Of course it matters. We appreciate Mary's devotion that morning at the tomb; but if this is how the story ends, Mary is most pitiful and hopeless. She is seeking a Savior who couldn't even save Himself. She is putting her trust in a dead man, and the dead have no help to give. No matter how faithful and devoted she is, her faith and devotion will do nothing for her.

If we stop now, the message of Easter isn't a pretty one: "No matter how devoted and committed you are, in the end you have no hope."

So let's not leave Mary Magdalene just quite yet, because this isn't the end of the story.

"Sir," she says to the Gardener, "if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Ah, but the Gardener isn't the gardener. He does, however, know the answer to her question: Jesus is not in the tomb because He is standing in front of her. He is not dead. He is risen from the dead.

He is risen! This will not be a day for Mary to weep and think about what might have been. This is not a day for her to reflect that all life, no matter how great, ends in death. No! This is a day to cry out that death is swallowed up in victory, and that Jesus truly is the Savior of the world. He has suffered God's punishment for the sins of the world on the cross, but His Father has not left Him in the grave. Christ is alive-risen from the dead! And that means that He has conquered sin, death and the devil.

Not only is Christ alive, but He is also present with Mary Magdalene. Now that He is out of the tomb, He does not shake the dust off His sandals, depart for heaven and say, "I'm through with these thankless sinners." He appears to Mary, and He does so in the flesh-He is not trapped in some ethereal afterlife, but risen from the dead in soul and body. He appears to her with joyous news: He is alive, and He is alive to forgive. He does not call the disciples cowardly scoundrels who ran away; He calls them brothers whom He wants to see and speak to. He declares that they are not lost-His God is their God and His Father is their Father. Now that He is risen from the dead, the Lord wants to be with His people in the flesh, and to speak His Word of grace to them-to guarantee that they are heirs of eternal life.

The risen Lord also declares to Mary that He is going to ascend into heaven; and there, He will sit at the right hand of God, the Father almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. Far from what Mary expected when she arrived that morning, the tomb isn't the end of the story. The story is just getting good.

So, it's a good thing that we didn't leave Mary back when she was weeping at the tomb; for now, rather than respect her devotion, we can rejoice with her.

Jesus is risen from the dead, which means that He has conquered death.

Jesus is present with Mary, which means that He has conquered death for her.

He is about to ascend into heaven, which means He will rule with all things under His feet-for the good of Mary and all His people.

No more weeping for Mary: The Lord has wiped every tear from her eye.

So, now we'll leave Mary; because Mary hasn't been left.

II. Easter Day

A blessed Easter Day to you all, and do not dismiss what we celebrate here: For on this Easter morning, we celebrate nothing less than the triumph over death itself. Triumph over actual death-this is not some story we use as anesthetic, to make us feel better about life and its hardships in this world. No, we rejoice that Christ has accomplished what all science, medicine and human effort cannot possibly do-He has conquered the grave. He has won the victory so that we can truly live forever in the gracious presence of God. This is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

We celebrate, however, knowing that few celebrate this same miracle. Indeed, most of the world-along with the devil and our own sinful flesh-sees no use for believing in the Resurrection of Jesus. Apparently, it is just too good to be true.

For a while, many attacked the Easter story by trying to prove it false. "Jesus didn't rise from the dead," they would argue. "Somebody stole the body out of the grave." While it seemed to convince them, it really wasn't much of an argument; one could simply respond, "Who? Who took the body out of the grave? If the apostles had done so, the rest of the New Testament would be very short: Robbing that grave with Pilate's seal would be a crime against Caesar, and the Romans would have quickly ended the apostles' life. The Book of Acts would have been one chapter long, detailing the summary executions of the eleven, and there would be no epistles to follow. If not the apostles, then who? Christ's enemies? The ones who sought to discredit Him? Why would they take the body and make it look like Jesus actually did rise from the dead?" Such arguments have largely died down, with good reason: Those who advanced such arguments were pitting their own guesswork against the Word of the Lord. In a battle of wits, they essentially came unarmed.

Such arguments against the Resurrection have given way to a new false spirit of the age: The argument that it really doesn't matter if Jesus rose from the dead or not.

"It doesn't really matter" goes the persuasion. It doesn't matter if Jesus really rose from the dead or not; what matters is whether or not you believe it. If believing in the Resurrection brings comfort for you, then it's important for you to believe in the Resurrection. On the other hand, if believing that you get to heaven because you live a good life brings you comfort, then it's important for you to believe that you get to heaven because you live a good life. You see-and this is key to understanding religion in our world today, what actually happened doesn't matter. Religion is not about God; it is about you. It is not about how hard the Lord has labored to win your salvation; it's about how hard you believe. It doesn't matter what you believe in; what matters is how sincerely you believe. Religion is not about God. It is about you. Whatever you believe will get you into the life beyond.

This is the spirit of the age. This is why the world gushes admiration when clerics of different, contradictory faiths join together in worship and pretend that they all worship the same God. Do not be deceived: In doing so, the world does not seek to honor each religion for its individual teachings. Rather, the world applauds such syncretism because it discredits the individual teachings of each of these religions. Such a religion declares, "It doesn't matter if you believe you are saved because of Jesus or because of works or because of holy war. Believe whatever you want, and you'll be just fine."

In this way, it is a religion that preaches tolerance: "We must accept all religions and whatever they teach." But once again, do not be deceived: In order to accept all religions, each is required to give up any belief that contradicts anyone else. The truth that there is salvation only in Jesus Christ will not be tolerated, because it denies that there is salvation in other beliefs. The joyous Easter news that Jesus is the firstfruits of the dead must be suppressed, because it gives Him precedence over other gods.

So, this world's demand for tolerance is actually most intolerant, for you are not to believe that anything matters at all. In other words, the world seeks to take away our Lord so that we don't know where to find Him. Instead, the world seductively whispers that faith is not about Jesus; what's important is what you believe.

Make no mistake, this is a seductive temptation, for we are wired by sin to believe in it: Our old sinful nature wants everything to be about us, not God.

If you suffer such temptation, I urge you to consider the following.

First, remember Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She is sincere, she is grieving, she is devoted to the Savior; and all of this is good and right and proper. However, all of this is worth nothing if Jesus is not risen from the dead. If Jesus is still in the tomb, Mary's faith is useless because she has no hope of eternal life. Mary's faith is worth something only because of what Christ has done-died for her sins and risen from the dead. This is most important to understand: It is vital that we have faith; but is also vital that we have faith in what it is true. No matter how sincere, faith in what is false cannot save. It is the Lord who gives us eternal life by His death on the cross, and it is He who gives us faith to believe in Him.

Second, when tempted to believe the world's lie that it doesn't really matter, remember that this is a direct violation of God's Law. His first commandment declares, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." "Before Me" does not mean, "As long as I'm first, you can have other gods." "Before Me" means, "in My presence, in my sight." In other words, "You shall have no other gods. Period." To teach that what you believe doesn't really matter violates God's Law and deserves His eternal judgment.

Third, the world's lie that what you believe doesn't really matter is a terrible violation of the Gospel. The Lord God has given His only Son to die on the cross for the sins of the world, and the world tries to make the Son just one savior among many, and no better. To do so cheapens His sacrifice on that cross-for if there are other ways to heaven, why did He have to die? To do so is to call our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, a fool: If He didn't have to die for our sake, then why did He let Himself be put on a cross?

Fourth, understand that the world's teaching, that what you believe doesn't really matter, offers you no hope whatsoever. At the end of the world, will all religions lead to a pleasant afterlife? Will those who teach reincarnation be reincarnated back into a world that has ended? Will heaven be divided into a ghostly realm for those who believe they will achieve nothingness, and a physical realm for those who believe in the resurrection of the body? Will those who declare that Jesus is not the Son of God stand before Him, alongside those who confess that He is? Can your faith, which cannot keep you alive on this earth, really raise you when you are dead? To the teaching "It doesn't matter," the

world must hastily tack on a "Don't worry about it." If you do worry-if you think about it, the world's idea falls apart like a house of cards. There is no hope to such teachings.

It is why the choir sang before, "All our hopes were ended, had Jesus not ascended from the grave triumphantly."

It is why St. Paul declares in I Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile."

Clearly, what you believe does matter.

And this we believe, because the certain Word of God proclaims: Christ is risen from the dead. The only-begotten Son of God became flesh and died for the sins of the world, suffering God's judgment for our sin. Three days later, He rose again from the dead. And, as He was for Mary Magdalene, He is risen, He is present; and, as promised, He is ascended.

Rejoice, for Christ is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns forevermore. This is Good News for the one who is guilty of sin, and thus it is Good News for all: The price has been paid for your sin-the Sacrifice has been made. You can be sure that God approves of what Christ has done on the cross, because He has raised His Son from the dead. Therefore, you are forgiven. This is Good News for those who face death, and so it is Good News for all: Christ has been raised from the dead, and He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Although you face death, you will be raised from the dead because Christ has defeated the grave. This is Good News for those who grieve: Although we must mourn those who have died in the Lord, the Lord declares that we will be comforted. The grave is not the end of the story. The Resurrection is the beginning of eternity. All this is true because Christ is risen.

Christ is risen, and Christ is present. He appeared, body-blood-and-all to Mary Magdalene in the garden, speaking to her words of grace and forgiveness. He did not abandon His people, nor will He ever. He is present with you, body-blood-and-all in His means of grace. In your Baptism, He has washed away your sin and joined you to His death; and because He shares His death with you, you do not have to die for your sins. In His Word, He speaks His faith-giving promises to you, assuring you that you are forgiven for all of your sins-and that you have life everlasting. In His holy Supper, He gives to you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, that He might raise you-body, blood and all-on the Last Day. Christ is risen, and Christ is present to give you newness of life.

Christ is ascended. And even while He is present with us by His means of grace, He "sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." You can therefore be assured that you are not forsaken, for the Lord who died and rose for you is attentively working all things for your good. Even physical death, should He not return first, for He will thus deliver you to the kingdom of heaven.

All this is true because Christ is risen from the dead. What we celebrate today is nothing else and nothing less than the triumph over death-physical death and eternal death. You will find such blessings in no one else but the Lord Jesus Christ, and He showers them upon you freely this day.

Christ is risen. Christ is present. Christ is ascended. Because these things are most certainly true, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen