

# THE CHURCH'S FIRST SERMON

April 4, 2021

Text: John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

On February, 27, 1991, at the height of the conflict known as Desert Storm, Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. It stated that her son, Clayton, Private 1<sup>st</sup> Class, had stepped on a mine in Kuwait and was dead. Ruth Dillow later wrote, *"I couldn't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For three days I wept. For three days I expressed anger and loss. For three days people tried to comfort me, to no avail because the loss was too great."* Every parent here can relate to her grief; it's among the most difficult of human experiences for a parent to lose a child. But on the third day after Ruth Dillow received that message, the telephone rang. The voice on the other end said, *"Mom."* After a brief pause, during which Ruth Dillow could not speak, the voice continued, *"Mom, it's me. I'm alive."* Ruth Dillow said, *"I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice."* Ruth's son was alive. The earlier message she had received was an awful mistake! She said, *"I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels, because my son whom I had thought was dead, was alive!"* Surprise, Ruth Dillow! The beloved son you thought was dead is alive!

On her way to the tomb that third day, I'm sure Mary couldn't begin to describe her grief and shock. It was almost more than she could bear. The Lord she loved was dead. I'm sure she was reminiscing and thinking back to her first encounters with Jesus. She remembered how Jesus had changed her life. This was the man who had given her a chance when everyone else pretty much wrote her off as worthless. This was the man who treated her with dignity and respect, while others treated her with ridicule for being a crazy woman plagued by her demons. This was the man who not only restored her faith in herself, but had instilled in her the belief that God was indeed alive and at work in the world ... to help the poor, to strengthen the weak and frightened, to do battle with evil, and to bring new hope to people **just like her**. With Jesus, she really could believe God was real and that God was here, that God really cared. God really was in this world doing good things. **Jesus showed her that.**

And then in just a few short days, all that had changed. It was gone forever. Her hope was crucified with Jesus that excruciating afternoon they nailed Him to the cross. That one brief, shining moment of new life and new possibilities was taken from her by the political and religious rulers, those politicians who always seemed to take whatever they wanted with impunity to maintain their power and control. All Mary knew was that Jesus was killed and for all she cared, she might as well have died with him. She went to the tomb early in the morning, probably because she couldn't sleep, which is not uncommon for people in grief. She went to anoint Jesus' body. This would be her final expression of love and devotion, her last attempt at being near him and to hold onto her now shattered, broken, dead dream.

Upon seeing that the stone which sealed the tomb had been rolled away, all Mary could think was that someone had broken into the tomb and stolen Jesus' body. Her sadness was now compounded with her outrage ... This is just too much! Hadn't Jesus suffered enough humiliation? Won't they let him rest in peace? Frantically she ran to tell the disciples. Peter and this other disciple (*the one John describes as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," we talked about him a bit on Good Friday*), they hurried back to the tomb with her. They went in, they see the linens strewn about, the cloth that had been around Jesus' head folded up neatly, and, we are told, they believed ... but we are not told *what* they believed; perhaps it only means they believed Mary, that the body really was gone. Many people have assumed the text means they believed the Resurrection had happened, but a plain reading of this text doesn't really say that ... it tells us Peter and the other disciple had simply gone on home, and that they had not yet understood the scriptures regarding Jesus' return to the living. Now, going on home and leaving behind a still-grieving Mary is hardly the behavior of excited disciples who believed Jesus had risen!

The narrative then shifts back to Mary who remained outside the tomb, crying. As she wept, she bent over to look inside and saw two angels ... although she probably didn't know they were angels. It's likely she thought these were two ordinary men ... and typically obtuse men at that; here they are asking a woman in a graveyard why she's crying. Duh! People are often in tears visiting a cemetery! Maybe she wants to answer, *"Why am I crying? I'm allergic to the flowers here, why do you think I'm crying?! Who are you, anyway?"* What she does say is this: *"They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him."*

Next, we read, *"At this, she turned around ..."*

Now, why did she turn around? I'm admittedly using some imagination here, but perhaps it was something in the way these two angel characters asked the question that caused her to turn ... maybe these angels were grinning, maybe even winking and looking over her shoulder behind her as they are asking, *"Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for?"* I think it's quite possible she turns around to see what or who they are looking at, and sure enough, Someone was standing there. Now, when you're crying over something stolen, everyone you meet on the scene is a potential thief. That's where Mary is. Jesus is right there in front of her, and in the state she's in she can't even recognize Him. She's mad, she's sad, she's frustrated, she's distraught, and she thinks He's the gardener, and maybe even the body snatcher himself! *"Sir,"* she begs him, *"if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

And just as Ruth Dillow heard that familiar voice of her son on the other end of the phone say, "Mom", so Mary heard that familiar voice of the Son of God say to her, "Mary." *"Mary, it's me. I'm alive."* Surprise, Mary Magdalene! Ruth Dillow had said, *"I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice. My son was alive."* I can imagine Mary Magdalene saying to the disciples, *"I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice. My Lord was alive!"* We can only imagine the wonder and joy as she surges forward to embrace him. He is not dead! He is alive! Like their friend Lazarus before Him, He was alive again. Well, not quite like Lazarus. Lazarus would die again. But Jesus has left death behind Him forever (*I can imagine Jesus saying, "Been there, done that, and won't do it again!"*)

To be clear: Today we are proclaiming an historical reality: that the tomb really was empty, that Jesus physically, personally came back from the dead. That's the message of Easter. It's about the reality of life beyond the grave, and it is about the very real hope of heaven permeating our life today. For the empty tomb is also an assertion that the tomb of death contains none who belong to Christ. The grave is not the end. It is only a transition into God's greater new reality. Those who have gone before us, including those we have memorialized in these beautiful flowers gracing our sanctuary, have stepped through the door of death, led by our risen Lord, into the new Jerusalem ... into the new heaven and the new earth. We gather today to remember not only Jesus' resurrection. We gather to remember that because He lives, they live as well ... as will we ... forever!

Mary did what any of us would do under the circumstances ... she rushed to embrace the one she thought was dead, but now undoubtedly was very much alive. And Jesus responds by saying, "Do not hold onto me." At first reading, Jesus' comment to Mary seems perplexing, insensitive. I mean, hugging someone you love from whom you've been separated, that's the most natural thing in the world ... at least it was before our lamentable pandemic restrictions! Families being reunited at the airport, soldiers returning from war to their hometown families and friends. How does one not hold onto and embrace and hug one whom you believed was dead and gone, but now, miraculously, is alive, and here, standing there right before your very eyes? Well, I'm sure Jesus didn't mean, "DON'T TOUCH ME!" Or "SIX FEET!" No, when Jesus said to Mary, *"Do not hold onto me ..."* of course He was not prohibiting her from touching Him. Rather, Jesus was giving Mary an assignment, a calling. *"Mary, don't stay here holding me. Go! Go and tell the others you've seen Me, and give them this message that I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."*

And she does. She lets go of him, she lets go of the Jesus she knew and loved, and she goes out to preach the Christian church's first sermon: "I have seen the Lord." It's an effective sermon, it's a great three point sermon: **"I"** ... I, the Mary you know, the Mary you know to be credible, the Mary you know whose life has been obviously touched and changed by Jesus ... **"have seen"** ... I have seen him, I have experienced him, I'm testifying to what I experienced, not to someone's second or third hand experience ... **"the Lord"** ... not some teachings about the Lord, not some mythical account, not some body of literature passed down through the ages, but the living Lord Himself. *"I have seen the Lord!"* She testifies to what she saw, what she believes, and to what she's been told. That's what Jesus told her to do. And her life obviously gives her credibility, for the others who know her believe her ... they believe her as a credible witness when she testifies Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

And in doing so, she proclaims what the church has been supposed to proclaim ever since ... the reality of the living Lord. This Easter I invite all of us to embrace the living Lord, but don't just hold onto Jesus! Live credible lives that give you the right to be heard, and go and tell what you have experienced, go and live what you believe, go and say what He tells you, until that glorious day when you, too, will return to our Father and our God.

He is risen! HE IS RISEN, INDEED!