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*Then she knew he was still alive!*

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Mary of Magdala had risen very early that day. While it was still night, she'd walked out onto the streets of Jerusalem in the darkness, to make her way to him. It was dangerous being a woman walking alone, but she couldn't wait any longer. After all the grueling experiences of the week she was in shock. What had happened was impossible to comprehend - everything they had worked for, everything that they had left home or jobs for, all that they had come to believe was possible - a new world, a new "Kingdom of God," Jesus had called it - all of that had cruelly and abruptly crashed around them like the aftermath of a horrific earthquake. The very foundations of their lives were shaken. Just a short week ago, on Palm Sunday, Jesus was a star - the main attraction for the crowds gathering for the festival, cheered as the hope of for their nation, some even calling him God's Messiah.

But politics was as fickle then as it can be now, and the supporters had sharply turned on Jesus, for reasons that still weren't completely clear to Mary or the other followers. Only one thing was completely clear: Jesus' disciples had lost the dearest friend they'd known, a profound teacher who had changed their lives, their mentor. And they'd lost their sense of purpose in life, their very identity as his trusted companions and students. Now the only thing that could still be done for Jesus was to ensure he had a decent burial. To give him what the religious customs called for, to at least treat his battered corpse with tender dignity. Mary hadn't been able to sleep, waiting for this one last thing she could still do for him.

Maybe you've known the feelings that motivated Mary that day -- the things we are driven to when a loved one is gone, and we do not quite comprehend it yet. We stay in the hospital room for several hours after the official declaration of death, just holding his hand as it grows more cold, hoping for a little more time with him, just a little more...We take great care in picking out the right clothes to dress the body - ones she'd always liked wearing, and the lipstick color in which she'd always felt prettiest. Later we keep returning to the graveside to talk to our precious ones, even though we don't really think they can hear us; it's just a comfort to be near where their bodies now lie. Soldiers risk their lives to recover the remains of their buddy, knowing that his family will treasure it.

For all these reasons, we can imagine what drove Mary to wake up so early and get to Jesus' tomb; we also can imagine her horror when the body of Jesus is missing, the door to the tomb ajar. She's convinced that his body has been snatched away -

perhaps to be further desecrated and mocked by his enemies, perhaps to be publicly displayed as some macabre lesson to the rest of the disciples, to ensure they cease his work. That was a common practice of Rome – which often ordered crucifixions to be held along the main public highways, as a warning – a gruesome billboard whose message no traveller could avoid.

So finding the empty tomb, Mary flees to get Peter and John. She knows right where to find them. Because on the Sabbath day just ended, these followers -- who have spent months together on the road with Jesus and one another – apparently have slowly reconvened, not really knowing where else to go. They've faced one another with guilt and confusion and sheer terror -- this group where so few of them stayed loyal to Jesus -- and they've slowly started talking it through, over and over and over, trying to understand, trying to grapple with their utter panic that they will be the next accused.

Peter and John do come to the garden, investigate and leave again, but Mary won't leave, because she has still received no answer that satisfies her. Jesus' body is still missing, so she keeps asking her questions: "Where is the body? Where have they laid him?"

Unrelenting, she asks anyone she sees. She'll ask the two complete strangers she finds sitting in the tomb, never derailed from her mission by their odd and sudden presence in that location. And next she'll ask the gardener. She'll talk to anyone who might know, who might be in the vicinity. *Where is Jesus?*

You see, Mary kept asking her questions, and asking her questions, and asking her questions, looking for Jesus, until Jesus called her by name again. "Mary."

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Who was this Mary, this Mary from the town of Magdala, a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee? According to my Sunday School teacher, she was a prostitute; according to the song from Jesus Christ Superstar, she was Jesus' lover - or wanted to be; and according to The Da Vinci Code, the recent best-seller, Mary Magdalene was Jesus' secret wife, with whom he had a child.

Recent scholarship doesn't support any of these theories; they probably arose to support one view of the priesthood over another. A married or sexually active Jesus threatens the requirement of a celibate priesthood, and the primary purpose of declaring Mary Magdalene a prostitute seems to have been a rather unbecoming effort by church fathers to disqualify Mary from the role she'd otherwise be entitled to as a primary apostle of Jesus. She was the first one to see the risen Jesus, the first Jesus commissioned to tell others he was alive, and she did so bravely. That's an awkward set of facts when you're trying to claim that women should be silent in church or banned from the priesthood altogether.

But if Mary should not bear those caricatures, then who is this Mary, who kept asking questions, asking questions, asking questions, and looking for Jesus, until he called her by name, again?

The gospels of Mark and Luke say that Mary of Magdala had been freed by Jesus from seven demons – Bible language for saying she'd had many serious problems, and through Jesus, God had utterly changed her life. None of the gospel writers felt the need to catalog what Mary's troubles had been, but today we still understand "demons," don't we? The things that eat at us, plague our thoughts, creep into our dreams at night and wake us up in a sweat.

Have you ever experienced the demon of being riddled with self-doubt, taunted by fears for the future, worried about how good a parent or spouse you've been? I have. Have you ever been wracked with doubts whether you've lived up to what you had hoped you'd do or be, with anxiety about your job performance, or with nagging suspicions that you've foolishly squandered talents or money or opportunities? It's the mid-life question so many of us know all too well: is this all there is to life? We don't know whether Mary Magdalene's demons were worry over a life-threatening cancer recurring, dementia or addiction, whether it was a trauma suffered by from war, an abuser who haunted her, the creeping fear of death, or an unending grief. But we do know these demons are real, the stuff of the life we live, or others we know and love.

And this also we know, by all accounts: that Jesus – by word or healing touch – had somehow made Mary of Magdala new, and that as far as Jesus was concerned, her past infirmities were over. He no longer saw them.

We know that Mary Magdala was someone whom Jesus had called by name *before*. She knew his voice instantly. She knew what is sounded like when Jesus called her by name.

That's why Mary got up so early on Easter morning while it was still dark, why she came back to the garden a second time, why she stayed there even when Peter and John had left. That's why Mary kept asking questions, kept asking questions, kept asking questions, kept looking for Jesus until he called her name again. Because he'd called her by name before.

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What about you? Have you been called by name before? Known by your first name, as Mary was known by hers?

Some may say no, almost instinctively, as if this were too great a thing, or too odd. But I don't mean that a voice spoke out loud to you – or that in one brilliant flash of insight you were convinced God existed – although for some these do happen.

Rather, I mean, Have you ever experienced something that seemed given just to you, just when you needed it, in a way that you didn't think possible, something that could have been of God? Has there been a time when you prayed – not even sure to whom you were praying – and an unexpected peace fell over your shoulders? Have you ever screwed up the courage to ask someone for advice, and against all odds, they said just what you needed to hear, just at the right moment, and it led to more healing and wholeness for you or others? Have you ever fumed over missing one opportunity, only to discover that a far better fit for your special gifts has opened up later, one that will be much more fulfilling, perhaps more of God's will for your life? Have you ever prepared to lambast someone for their failures – a child, a spouse, a co-worker -- but glimpsed something in their face and suddenly found yourself able to forgive them, with a calm that seemed to come from beyond you? Have you ever come into a worship service, about to give up on the whole church thing, then had one little clause from one anthem arrest you, fill you with new-found hope, playing itself over and over in your head for days afterwards?

Coincidences? Perhaps. But once you have experienced a bit of what the power of Love and Forgiveness, Mercy and Peace can do in your individual life, you begin to wonder if there is One who not only created the vast universe and set it in motion, but who might – astonishingly – care about *you*. One who knows *you* by your first name. One who yearns to be close to *you*, to bring you new life, to take all those places where you have felt dead, and bring them alive again.

That has been my experience, and it's why I stand here now. One time, and then another, and then another, I find that when I think I'm standing in a place of darkness and death, looking into a tomb of failure or emptiness or loss, I sense someone whisper my name, and I know I'm not alone anymore.

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Mary kept asking her questions, asking her questions, asking her questions, trying to find Jesus. Why? Because Mary had been called by name by Jesus before – because she had experienced what it was like to be with him.

Here at King's Chapel, we try to be like Mary of Magdala - to question and question, to look and search, until we find answers that make sense to us, as individuals. We don't require everyone to follow one Creed, reciting a litany of things to which we must subscribe in order to belong. We understand that God speaks to different ones of us in different ways. There are other churches that may demand people follow the model portrayed in this gospel by the disciple who raced ahead, and then believed even when he didn't understand. Certainly, when it comes to things of God, we'll never understand it all completely. But for me, I'm more like Mary – I learn by what I experience, by the encounters I have with the Living God of Undying Love.

So here we gather, to share among one another, the times we may have experienced God, here or there, and how it changed us. Could it be? Did that really occur? Here

we feel free to question and doubt, to ask the tough questions, to disagree with prevailing views, to even have different perspectives among ourselves. But we're committed to the exploration. To be persistent in our looking and looking for One who is alive, who knows us all by name – every one of us.

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Friends, on this Easter, there is not one of us who can say with certainty what exactly happened that first Easter. Questions still abound, and they have since the church began. Among the first Christians, some said that Jesus rose into a new way of living, a new way of being present to us now, no longer in a bodily form that could be physically held by his friends, but nevertheless, real and palpably known to them. Some described the Spirit of Christ who now lived within them, within their own bodies, as close as breath itself. Others found Love Alive, so near and tangible, that as they tried to explain what the world had never known before, they said he was as real as he had been always with them – unmistakably Jesus – one they could feel and touch. None of us was there, so we cannot say exactly what they saw or heard or knew, but on one thing every single account agrees, and history bears out.

This is clear! Something very powerful happened that day. Before Easter, Jesus' friends were a scared group of men and women, huddled in fear from the authorities, overcome by their own guilt at betraying their Lord, leaderless and bereft, fearing their own deaths. But after Easter they were transformed. In some way – some way – they experienced again Jesus in their midst, still loving them, despite their failures; Jesus still trusting *them*, of all people, to spread his message about a God of Love and Justice and Peace for everyone -- women and men, Jews and Gentiles, slave and free. Because of what they experienced on Easter, each called by name again, that small group set aside their all-consuming fear of death, and went forth into the world. Death had been overcome and a new life in God had begun! Not by worldly might or power or prestige -- but by that little groups' message of Love, their lives of love for one another, and their conviction that they were not alone -- God forever changed lives. Changed mine. Can change yours.

Mary kept asking her questions, asking her questions, asking her questions, until Jesus called her by name again. Then her life was changed forever. And ours, too.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed! Amen.