

Behold the man who died and who now lives. His heart was stopped but again pulses with a new rhythm and vigor. His veins spilled their crimson contents all over the Golgotha ground but now course with a fresh supply of warm, red, oxygenated blood. His lungs were deflated and flat after that loud cry with which He yielded up His Spirit but now they expand and fill with the perfumed, stale, air of the tomb. His eyes were closed in death but now open and squint to take in the sites. His hands had been nailed but now they spread all ten living fingers open before picking up the grave cloths and folding them. His feet had dragged lifelessly as His body was placed into the tomb but now they reach to the ground and plant ten living toes into the cool dirt. His skin had cooled to the ambient temperature of the stone-and-dirt grave but now radiates heat and warmth, though it still possesses five distinct wounds from nails and a spear. His brain had been still and dead but now electrons dance and synapses and neurons sparkle. His stomach, which hasn't eaten since Thursday, growls and suggests somewhat urgently that the Lenten fast is over. Behold, the man, Jesus, God and man, lives. He rises triumphantly from the dead and strolls out of the grave into His creation.

As soon as day began to break after the Sabbath had ended, Mary went to the tomb. When she saw that the stone had been taken away, dislocated from what she knew was its permanent resting place, she ran and told the disciples. She found Peter and John first, and the words came crashing out so quickly, it's any wonder they understood her at all. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

They all went back to the tomb, Peter and John sprinting. John doesn't bother to tell us whether Mary Magdalene ran or walked. But when the men wandered away bewildered, she was there. She stayed outside weeping, grieving at the double loss. First the One she called Lord was crucified. Now His body was missing. The angels are perplexed at her weeping. "Why?" "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Then she turned around and beheld the Risen Lord. He asked her the very same question as the angels: "Why are you weeping?" and added, "Whom are you seeking?"

Of course she supposed He was the gardener. This was an honest mistake. Technically, Jesus is a Gardener, but of an ancient Garden of Eden and of the new Eden to come. But Jesus is not the kind of gardener Mary assumed him to be.

When you usually think of a gardener, you think of someone at a cemetery who cuts the lawn, weekwacker, makes sure that the flower beds at the entrance of the cemetery look beautiful. He tries to shield you from how horrible death is. He keeps things neat and tidy. Yes the gardener tries to paint a picture of peace, tranquility and beauty. We could call the funeral homes, gardeners as well. They try to shield you from how horrible death is.

First, there's the cutting, draining, embalming, stuffing, plugging, sewing, and otherwise disguising the cold reality of a dead body to make it look as close as possible to the picture you provide the undertaker. Or they hand you over a lovely box, with the ashes of your loved one within. Then you have some of your friends, who act like gardeners. They come up with all sort of euphemisms to try and ease your pain. "He has passed on." "She's in a better place." "He's watching over you." "Heaven needed another lady in its bowling league." Finally, the funeral in

the church has been replaced with the “celebration of life” in the mortuary. That’s all exceedingly odd and out of touch with the reality that death is a rupturing of God’s perfect creation. Death is ugly, painful, filling you with deep sadness.

Furthermore, our culture promotes death. The strong are encouraged to eliminate the weak. Mothers are persuaded that it is more convenient to kill their unborn children rather than shouldering the burden of being a parent. As soon as our elderly show some sign of slowing down, we want to scuttle them off to care facilities rather than take the time to grow old with them. And if our elderly are indeed too infirm to live at home, we do not take time out of our busy life to visit those who gave us life. Vengeance is yours. Suicide is noble. Divorce makes sense. Happiness at Allcosts.

No matter how we paint death, its only Jesus Christ who can bring true optimism and hope into our lives. Mary Magdalene found a reason to be optimistic on Easter morning. She thought Jesus was just a plain old earthly gardener. But Jesus is so much more. Jesus said to her, “Mary.” So many times, Jesus had called her by her name while he was alive. And now she heard that familiar voice call her name called again. She looked up, and realized that it was Jesus. The Bible tells us that she was so excited that she called out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” which means teacher. She grasped Jesus’ legs and did not want to let him go. Somehow, he was alive!

What a turn-around for Mary! One minute God is dead, and there is no hope. But then she sees that Jesus is alive. God is not dead. There is hope! There is a reason to be joyful, to be hopeful, to be optimistic. Jesus was alive and well, and that’s what changed her. Her hero was alive. We all love heroes. But there is only one hero in all the world who has died, and then has come back to life again, Jesus Christ.

This one-on-one moment that Mary has with Jesus also belongs to you. When things look hopeless, remember – it’s not a dead end. There is another way that leads to hope. There was once a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. Some of his friends asked him, “Why have you become a Christian?” He answered, “Well, it’s like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn’t know which way to go. And there in the road were two men, one dead, and one alive. Which one would you ask which way to go?” For every person in life, there is a fork in the road. To be a Christian, or to not be a Christian. One way is littered with nothing but death – unfulfilled dreams, broken promises, empty optimism, charismatic leaders who are dead. But there is another way, and in that fork stands someone who is alive. Someone who does not break his promises, someone who knows what your dreams are and promises to fulfill them beyond what you could ever imagine, someone who gives you a real reason to be optimistic. That someone is the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Think of it this way. If there was a rattlesnake in your house and an animal control person came to get rid of it, would you go in the house if the animal control person went in but never came out? I don’t think so. You would assume that the rattler won that round. What if the control person went in and came out with the rattler’s fangs embedded in his shin? While you might feel sorry for the animal control guy you’d also assume that it was safe to go inside. For even though that snake might still be slithering around your house shaking his rattler, without its fangs it no longer has the

ability to inflict damage. The snake has now become more of a nuisance than a danger. That's what Jesus did with death. He took away death's ability to kill when he suffered its bite. Yes, death still rattles around making a nuisance of itself but it can no longer do permanent damage.

Since Jesus rose again we can be certain that we too will rise from the dead, for just as the Father did not abandon his Son to the grave, he will not abandon us. The death of a loved one, your own death – you no longer have to feel hopeless when you face those things. Jesus calls out your name, and reminds you that he has experienced death himself, he has overcome death, and promises you that because of him, death is not the end of the road for you. Jesus says, "Because I live, you also shall live."

When you look into your past and you wonder how you can ever make up for all the mistakes you have made, Jesus calls out your name, and reminds you: "I died for your mistakes. God the Father has accepted my sacrifice for you – that's why he raised me from the dead. I'm alive, and that's proof that God has forgiven you. You do have peace with God right now." Only one thing can bring hope to a hopeless situation. Only one thing can bring joy where there is only sadness. Only one thing can bring life where there is nothing but death. Only one thing can give you a real reason to be optimistic. And that one thing is knowing that Jesus Christ is alive, right now – he has risen from the dead.

It is true that empty things can be the pits. From empty cereal boxes to empty cartons of milk, from empty gas tanks to empty refrigerators, from empty wallets to empty checkbooks, from empty nests to empty chairs at the dining table. From empty promises to empty threats, from empty hearts to empty lives. But there is one empty thing that is not the pits, and that is the empty tomb on Easter morning. That empty tomb filled Mary Magdalene's head with an incredible sense of joy and comfort and hope. It changed her life forever.

The comfort and hope you receive this morning from the Word of God is just as real as the comfort and hope Mary received. Mary returned to those disciples a different person – someone whose world had changed for the better. As you leave here this morning and return home, may you carry with you that same hope that Mary felt. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.