

Easter Day Sermon on Sunday 5th April 2026 - Canon James Shakespeare

Wow! What an amazing story we just heard. The story of the first Easter and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalen, one of his closest friends & followers, whose life had been turned round by Jesus... There's a lot of energy in that story + if you're a runner, you'll notice the number of times that characters (in the story) are running – running to find out what has happened. Running to tell their friends the good news, which suggests something pretty important is happening... Well, I'm delighted to tell you that we've got a special visitor today, who was part of the story & is going to tell us what she discovered: so here is 'Mary Magdalen' -

"I have seen the Lord!"

'You don't seem surprised. You are thinking, Mary Magdalene, of course you've seen the Lord. You walked with him daily after he healed you. That's not what I mean. I saw him risen – alive!

You might not know how I felt: I was there, at the foot of the cross, when Jesus gave Mary and John to each other. Who did I have? No one! | I was there when he said, "*I'm thirsty,*" and they gave him a swab of vinegar. What could I do? Nothing!

I was there when he said, "*It is finished.*" Who would have thought it would come to that? A dead man on a cross—God forsaken! Was this the glory he had intended? Was this God's way of acting? God-forsaken – alone - lonely. As a daughter of Jerusalem, the one thing I had learned was to mourn.

I loved him. I had followed him. I would stay with him! – when the Sabbath was over, of course. I thought the worst had happened, until I got to the tomb that morning. The stone had been moved – they couldn't even leave a body in peace! Surely the Master had deserved a proper burial. Later – I wondered why I hadn't walked right in! Instead I ran to tell the others – what they had done to our teacher and friend's body Peter and the beloved ones left – running, but I couldn't stay still long enough for them to return. I set out again.

Why? You ask.... To cry, of course, near to his last resting place – or to find out where he was taken! Now I had the courage to look in and two messengers guided us. Would you ask a visitor at a grave site why she is crying?

I was so lonely – without Jesus. He meant everything to me! Then the gardener came and asked the same thing, adding "*Whom are you looking for?*" Looking for? "*Just a body – to give it a proper burial now that it's been desecrated.*"

Then a wonderful thing happened. "*Mary!*" The gardener knew my name. No one knew me that well and loved me so much as Jesus! "*Mary....*"

He had told us once that he calls the sheep by his own name and they know his voice. *Teacher and Master!* I wanted to cling to him forever – not ever to enter such despair again. But I couldn't.

His words were beautiful – *“Go to my sisters and brothers and tell them that I am on the way. To my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”* Not only was I freed from that deep despair, but then I knew this was not only a teacher of Israel, the Lord – God has acted in this Jesus. I have seen the Lord!

What an amazing transformation. Here was someone whose whole life had fallen apart – who was filled with sadness & grief – because her best friend Jesus had been put to death, death on a cross. She had come to the tomb to pay her respects, filled with sadness... and in the space of a few moments her life is turned around again.

First, when she finds the tomb empty, she is terrified & fearful – she thinks someone has stolen Jesus' body. Then she sees a vision of angels. And finally, someone speaks to her, and she remains frightened, thinking he's the gardener. Until, that is, he calls her by name ('Mary!') and she realises – in an instant – that it's Jesus, alive again. And her sadness turns to joy, her fear turns to trust, and her sense of being alone turns to the realisation that her master is with her again! 'He's alive! I've seen the Lord!' What a transformation.

And the amazing thing is that this same transformation that happened to Mary Magdalen is what happens to us too (deep down in our hearts), as we discover that Jesus is alive, as we find that in Jesus any sadness we experience can turn to joy, any fear can turn to trust, and any loneliness can turn into the awareness of God's presence with us – any time, any place, anywhere. Faith really is that amazing!

Now today is full of surprises: we've just heard about the surprise of Mary Magdalen; there's the surprise of our beautiful Flowered Cross; and there will be the surprise of our Easter Egg hunt afterwards.

But I want to invite you, now, to think about Mary's Magdalen's surprise – *how she felt before* meeting Jesus again, and *how she felt afterwards*. In other words, the difference faith in Jesus (being in relationship with Jesus), risen from the dead, makes to us.

ALL AGE/ KIDS' ACTIVITY: Mary Magdalen before & after seeing Jesus again- Sad + Happy, or Lonely + Full of Joy...

How do we discover life, true life, where there seems to be only struggle & decay? How do we discover hope, enduring hope, where there seems to be (at best) relentless pressure and (at worst) conflict and despair? How do we learn to embrace the gifts of goodness, truth & beauty meaningfully, and in depth, beyond the surface level of appearance, fleeting pleasure?

It is to these very questions and concerns – to those with ears to hear – that the mystery of Easter addresses itself, offering untold spiritual riches. For what Easter tells us, in the language of the Christian gospel, is that (for all human beings) there is a journey to be made – both in this life & eternally – from death to life, from despair to hope, from fear to trust, and from darkness to light – all of which is a journey into the fullness of faith in Jesus Christ.

A journey from alienation to trust, and into a life-giving participation in the mysterious presence of God: at the heart of life, and intimate to each of us, whether we realise it or not. +All through the love of Jesus, GOD WITH US. Jesus, who loved us so much, that he died for us on the Cross – that we might experience forgiveness & Peace with God.

And this, our gospel proclaims, is what is made possible by the Passover (literally, the passing over) of Jesus, from death to life, on that 1st Easter, of which Mary Magdalen has a privileged place as the very first human witness.

For Easter celebrates the death & resurrection – the passing over from death to life – of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘powerful in word and deed’, who was seized and crucified by his enemies, during the ancient Passover feast in Jerusalem. And on Easter morning, on the 1st day of the week, the 1st day of the new creation, Jesus rose from the dead, appearing to Mary Magdalen and his other disciples & assuring them of God’s favour and presence with them.

And so Easter became the new Passover, the new means by which God would bring new life to his people everywhere, through the life & death & resurrection of Jesus, his incarnate Son. Here is the new way, enabled by God, for each of us to cross the great chasm and to journey over the canyon from death to life, from fear to trust, from sin to new life, forgiveness & reconciliation. And there really is no more important journey, for any of us, than this. As St Peter puts it to Cornelius, in our 1st reading:

‘He commanded us to preach to the people + to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living & the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

And so, from the earliest days of the church, people recognised God’s hand in what had happened to Jesus. And his followers (Mary Magdalen among them), taught by the risen Lord himself, interpreted his death & resurrection in the light of that earlier Passover, in the ancient story of Exodus. Jesus, the new Moses, would lead his people, the church, through desert trials to his heavenly kingdom. He would be with us always.

The question is, how do we ourselves (as we witness to the joy and transformation of Mary Magdalen on that 1st Easter) share in this life? How do we Passover from death to life, in our own hearts & lives, whether we’ve heard about the message of faith before, or not? +In a world increasingly uncertain, confused & in many parts of the world, violent & oppressive.

Well, on one level, the answer - & we all need to hear this – is endearingly simple: ‘Believe and be Baptised!’ For this was the message of the 1st disciples, sent out by Jesus himself after his resurrection, announced to people throughout the world. And their stories of Jesus’ life & teaching, the ‘Good News’ that was his gospel, brought people everywhere to believe in Christ as saviour, as they were baptised and received the Holy Spirit.

But what we discover, as we continue to plumb the depths of the Easter mystery (God’s loving presence with us, despite everything), is that this new life – through the Passover of our own Baptism, believing in the resurrection & renewed Sunday-by-Sunday – operates on many different levels. Indeed, the scope of Easter embraces everything.... But just let me finish by sharing (from my own human experience & conviction) a few of the different ways in which this new life operates – distilled from over 40 years’ experience, since I came to Christ, and nearly 30 years of ordained life.

1. it means beginning to discover, in prayer, the presence of God in our own hearts & minds, transforming us (at our deepest level) – from darkness to light, from loneliness to solitude, presence & peace... as we grow in depth of faith.

2. it means beginning to discover, in our friendships & relationships, the gifts & possibilities of true sharing & belonging, respecting the dignity of each person, and allowing their gifts & freedom to unfold: like a flower in bloom.

3. it means beginning to discover, however unpromising we may be at times, the miracle of trust & communion which is the church: the means of God’s ongoing work of healing & salvation & reconciliation in the world.

4. it means, discovering the mysterious work of redemption in all spheres of human life – in commerce & education, in politics & the arts, in international relations – wherever truth & goodness & beauty are sought out... And especially in praying & working for social justice, reconciliation & peace --- daring to speak out, when we see people embracing the paths of evil, rather than of trust, goodness + human dignity.

In other words, what we celebrate today – as we meditate on the good news experienced & proclaimed by Mary Magdalen, Jesus Christ risen from the dead – changes everything, including ourselves, as we dare to discover the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s love, which surpasses all understanding. *Let us pray.*

*God of glory, by the raising of your Son, you have broken the chains of death & hell: fill your Church with faith & hope; for a new day has dawned, and the way to life stands open, in our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen***