

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
John 20:1-18
April 20, 2025

He is Risen, Indeed!

Currently there are roughly 1.7 million incarcerated people in America today. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, about 1.1 million are in state prisons, 562,000 are in local jails like Clark County Jail, and 200,000 are in Federal Prisons and Jails. The U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation. About 562 inmates per 100,000 residents. More than 457,000 of these folks are sitting in local jails, yet to be convicted of their crimes, but unable to be free because they can't afford bail until trial....which could be months.¹

Some of these criminals are violent. Most are not. Some are drug offenders. Some are thieves. Some are white collar criminals.

Regardless, each is someone's child, parent, sibling, neighbor, or friend. People, just like us, who have made choices that have gotten them incarcerated.

So why all this talk about inmates? Sort of an odd topic for Easter.

Our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of John who had just witnessed the way that Jesus, his beloved rabbi, who had done nothing wrong, was treated like a criminal, accused of committing crimes against God and the Roman Empire, arrested, tried, wrongfully convicted, humiliatingly stripped of his clothing, brutally tortured, heinously crucified on a cross, and then left for dead in a borrowed tomb. Let me tell you, Jesus understood exactly what many incarcerated people throughout the world are experiencing today. He was considered one of them.

Join me as we read from John 20:1-18.

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. **2** So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4** Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7** as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The

¹ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html>

cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. **8** Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **9** (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) **10** Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb **12** and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." **14** At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This is my twentieth season preaching this story and it never gets old. Each year I reflect on it's meaning and each time God has something new to say through it. This year, I want to take a fresh approach. I want to look at each of the characters in the story. I want to consider what might have been holding them back from embracing the truth that Jesus had indeed been resurrected from the dead. I want to ask what message of hope would I share with someone who is incarcerated? And finally, if Jesus did indeed resurrect from the dead, could He resurrect us today in this life, right now?

If you are ever playing bible trivia and someone asks the name of one of Jesus' women disciples. Just say Mary. Chances are good that you'd get it right. But who was this Mary Magdalene in the story?

Mary Magdalene was a Jewish woman from the fishing town of Mandala along the western shores of the Sea of Galilee. Her name is mentioned twelve times in the gospels, more than most apostles. Luke and Mark tell the story about

how Jesus healed her of demon possession. So imagine the shame that must have surrounded her with having a mental illness due to demon possession. Now that she was free from all of that, she was a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. One of the few disciples who remained by Jesus' side at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified.

Mary loved her beloved rabbi. Not only did he heal her, but he treated her respectfully as a woman and even taught her like he had his male disciples. Jesus' broke all sorts of cultural norms in his day.

So imagine finally being treated as a person, and not an object of scorn, and having the one person who made you feel truly human be brutally and cruelly snatched away from you. Like the way I'm sure so many undocumented children whose parents have been whisked away must feel today. Her whole world had been pulled out from beneath her. I don't care what side of the immigration issue we fall. If we have heart, if we are truly followers of Jesus, we can't help but feel the weight of their grief.

Mary was engulfed by it. She was so grief stricken that she couldn't make sense of the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave just as he said he would. She was so grief stricken that she missed how the expensive grave clothes had been neatly folded up and laid aside where Jesus' body had been...but not stolen. She was so grief stricken that she couldn't tell that it was two angels who miraculously appeared and were sitting where Jesus once laid. And she was so grief stricken that when Jesus finally showed up before her, she thought he was the gardener and wondered where he had taken Jesus' body.

Grief like that can cover you like a deep fog that is hard to navigate within. It comes in waves. It hits you in ways that you never imagined. Even though it had been five years since your loss...boom...it can come back as if it was yesterday.

That was Mary Magdalene that first Easter morning. Have you ever experienced grief like that?

Then there was Peter. Funny disciple. A rough and tumble fisherman. Always first to make a big show. But last to show up at the scene. Peter just always seems to "Peter out" if you get what I mean. He was willing to say that he would die for Jesus' sake one moment. But then after Jesus' arrest, when a young girl identified Peter as one of Jesus' followers. Peter said, not once, but three times..."Nope, don't know the guy!"

Peter was the first to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God for whom they had waited centuries. Peter's name was originally Simon, but Jesus renamed him Peter which in Greek meant 'rock.' Peter's proclamation about Jesus being the Messiah, Jesus said, "Upon this rock, I will build my church." Or "Upon your profession of faith Peter, I will build my church."

Peter was one of Jesus' three besties. The ones he took up on a mountainside when he was transformed into his heavenly glory. The ones he took with him when he needed to grieve, or to pray, or to seek God's will for his life.

Peter and Jesus were like close brothers.

Can you imagine the guilt and shame that Peter carried to the tomb that morning? He had betrayed the one person who truly believed in him.

Like grief, guilt and shame can prevent us from seeing Jesus clearly. The text tells us that Peter ran into the tomb, looked inside, but didn't seem to get what was going on. He barged on into a potential crime scene, contaminating all the evidence.

Peter came right up close to it all. And yet still didn't believe that Jesus had resurrected from the dead. No matter how much he wanted to see that Jesus had come back to life, guilt and shame prevented him from believing. Perhaps he thought, "I let Jesus down. I let the other disciples down. I let myself down. I'm just not good enough to be close to Jesus any more."

Tell me that incarcerated people don't live that regret each and every day! I know they do. What guilt or shame is holding us back today from believing?

Then there was John. John, the writer of the gospel, who always refers to himself in the story as "The disciple who Jesus loved." It wasn't that Jesus loved John more, but somehow more than any other disciple, John seemed to really grasp the depth of Jesus' love for him. Jesus would stop at nothing, even crucifixion on a cross, so that John could be in relationship with God the Father. That was love."

This was John. A fisherman, like Peter. One of the sons of Zebedee. Who were known as the sons of thunder. Loud, boisterous. A man's man.

But at the Last Super we see how John intimately reclined on Jesus' chest as Jesus told his disciples his last and most important teachings.

John took off running after Peter, but was the first to arrive. Don't you love John's little dig at Peter. "Yeah you took off first, but I still beat you!" John didn't barge into the tomb like Peter. He noted that something strange was going on. This was not a grave robbery as Mary assumed. Something Jesus had told them earlier was starting to click. John saw and believed. Jesus was alive and was loose in the neighborhood!

Three different people. Three different perspectives. Two held back from seeing Jesus clearly. One who was free to "see and believe."

Where are we this morning? Do we see and believe like John? Or is something holding us back? Maybe it's our debilitating grief, like Mary. Maybe we've been hurt by religion and struggle to be spiritually vulnerable again. Maybe our family members have shut us out of their lives. Maybe our intellects demand more facts. Maybe it's our guilt and shame. Maybe we think if Jesus only knew what I have done, he wouldn't love me. God couldn't love me. Maybe there is

something from our past that continues to haunt us today. Something we did, or that we failed to do.

What if today on this Easter Sunday God is wanting to set us free from all of that, once and for all. Could we accept Jesus' forgiveness as a free gift of grace?

1 John says, "If confess our sins, Jesus is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."²

We might not be in a physical jail cell this morning, but we still might be imprisoned within the stone walls of our own hearts.

Folks, Jesus buried our sin in the grave. It is gone. That is Good News!

I believe with my whole heart that Jesus wants us to bust out of our tombs. Out of the cells that bind us.

Jesus wants us to live again in the light of his freedom.

Jesus wants us to have life and life to the full.³

Jesus wants to give us a new family through faith.⁴

All it takes is a simple belief that Jesus really is alive and has the power today to bring us back to life again too.

The Apostle Paul who experienced this radical life changing freedom from a terrible past said, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."⁵

Not only does this day free us from our past, but it frees us for the future. Because Jesus conquered death, we too can live freely and boldly for today not being afraid of anything we might face...even death. This is why Paul could sing...

"O death where is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

Victory over sin and death is ours because of today!

Can you hear it?

The stones of our hearts are being rolled away.

Dead bones are rattling.

Dead bones are rising to new life again.

Dead bones are coming out of the grave saying...

² 1 John 1:9

³ John 10:10

⁴ John 1:12-13

⁵ Galatians 5:1

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

“He is risen, He is risen, indeed!” Now go into all the world and say, “I have seen the Lord and Because of Him, I am made new and I can face tomorrow!”
Amen!