Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

“She supposed him to be the gardener.”

Early on the first day of the week – very early – a young woman slips out the door from her hideout into the darkness.

She quickly weaves her way through the shadowy streets until she reaches the city gates of Jerusalem.

She is known to us as Mary Magdalene because she comes from the fishing village of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee in the north.

She has followed a Jewish holy man, a rabbi, to Jerusalem, far from her home. She stays with him all the way to the end.

This Holy man has healed her of the demons inside her – whatever they were – demons that were choking her to death. He gave Mary back her life and she is totally devoted to him.

His name in Hebrew is Yesu and he also comes from the north, from the town of Nazareth. We know him as Jesus – a Medieval English translation of his Hebrew name. We also know him as the Christ, the anointed Holy One, the Son of God, titles that would come later.

But early on this first day, there is only silence and darkness. And mind-numbing fear.

Just a few days earlier, Yesu – Jesus – is arrested by the Romans, tortured and executed on a cross. It all happened so fast.

There is so much chaos and noise in Jerusalem on that terrible day – so much anguish and violence on the day we now call Good Friday, but which must have felt like anything but good.

Others flee and hide. But Mary of Magdala, she stays with Jesus until the end, until he dies.

Jesus’s broken body is taken from the cross and placed in a rocky tomb in a garden outside the walls of Jerusalem.

A secret supporter, a man with influence, Joseph of Arimathea, sees to it that Jesus gets a decent burial.

And so, Mary of Magdala, in the shadows before the dawn, goes to this rocky tomb, and she carries spices and oils tucked into her shawl to anoint his body.

When Mary reaches the tomb, she is alone. No one else is there.
And then her heart sinks, as if it could sink any further. She finds the tomb empty – completely empty.
The body of the One she followed has vanished into thin air, and only a few rags are left behind, neatly rolled up.
She does not know what to make of this, so she rushes back to tell the others who are in hiding.
Peter, the strongest among them, takes a few men they and run to the tomb to see for themselves.
Peter and the other men are dumbfounded. They have no idea either what to make of this, and they quickly go back into hiding.
But not Mary Magdalene. She stays. She is not budging until she finds out what happened.
Then this really get strange.
Angels, dazzling white, appear to Mary, but she is unimpressed. Where is Jesus? Tell me.
But they don’t tell her.
Then someone else is standing there. She supposes him to be the gardener.
Mary’s had enough of this. She demands to know from the gardener where the body of Jesus is stashed. “Tell me. Tell me now.”
How totally perfect: Mary is talking to the gardener.
Jesus, the gardener, is standing in front of her, standing on the thin line between life and death.
And in this moment, Mary understands. She sees Resurrection in front of her, and she is astonished.
In an instant, Jesus, the gardener, erases the line between life and death. Life for Mary will never, ever be the same again – and will never be the same again for us.
So it was, on this first Easter morning when the ugliness of death was swept away.

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The story of Jesus is not over. Not then. Not now.
This story might sound preposterous to us – a man rising from the dead? How is that possible? People just don’t do this. We are modern people; we know that.
A man rising from the dead sounded preposterous to ancient people, too. Ghosts maybe, but not people coming back from the dead.
Peter doesn’t believe it either. No one but Mary Magdalene believes it.

Not at first.
But consider this: Those who encounter the Risen Christ are completely transformed into new people. They are utterly changed.
Even Peter would go from collapsing in terror at the palace courtyard to becoming the bravest of the brave hearts. Nothing would stop him ever again.

In the days ahead, Jesus is seen everywhere: on a road to a town called Emmaus; in a locked room in Jerusalem; on a beach at the Sea of Galilee.

This is not about seeing a ghost, but about experiencing the Risen Christ – the Resurrection.

As our Bishop Barry so eloquently put it last evening at the Easter Vigil, “Any explanation must give way to experience.”
Those who first experienced the Risen Christ continued to write the story of Easter in the way they lived afterwards.

This ancient story of Easter is our story, too. We continue to write the story of Easter by how we live and work for peace, justice, kindness and love.

This way of life is not just about the afterlife; it is about this life, right now. The thin line between this life and the next is erased; it is only horizon we cannot yet see over.

What would the world be like if we really acted like we believe this? What would the world really be like if we truly acted like Easter people?
This challenge has been with us since the morning Mary stood at the empty tomb and encountered the gardener.

Living as Easter people does not come with the promise of an easy life. The only privilege of being Easter people is the privilege to serve others.

[This Easter season, I would invite you to join a community of faith if you don’t already have one.
If you live here in our area, join us here at Trinity Cathedral.
If you have been away from this cathedral for a while, welcome back.
We need you.

Join us and let’s explore this journey of faith together.
We don’t ask that you leave your brain at the door, but we do ask that you bring your heart and your openness.]

In the biblical tradition, faith is seen as a gift, not an achievement. It is not a product to be purchased or a degree to be earned.
Rather, faith is a gift from God to be experienced as beloved children of God.

We don’t have to walk this life of faith alone. When I can’t pray, when I feel empty, I know that someone else here is holding open a tender place and praying for me.

We proclaim the reality of this faith especially when we share in the bread and wine of our Holy Communion.

When we do, the Risen Christ is with us, lighting our path, and renewing us with the promise of Easter.

We aren’t just remembering a meal long ago; we are living into the promise of Resurrection now.

The question for us is not how is the bread and wine changed at our communion table; but rather, how are we transformed by the bread and wine as a people of faith?

Every time I come to this table, I know I am new and different, even if I cannot explain how.

And when we leave, we are called to live into the values Jesus teaches us; the values of kindness, not hate; compassion, not revenge; peace and justice, not violence.

We have work to do, people feed, the sick to comfort, children to rear, and a hurting world that needs every single one of us.

So today, stand with Mary Magdalene – this strong, brave amazing woman – at the empty tomb and watch for the gardener – he is right here among us and inside us.

Like Mary, allow yourself to be astonished again, as we discover the promise of new life that is ours forever.

May this Easter bring you many joys; may you be filled with the power of the Risen Christ, and may you live into the blessings of this new life that is ours – forever.

Alleluia Christ is Risen!