

As we heard, it was early on Sunday morning, the first day of the week, and before dawn, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene set out on a journey. The great city of Jerusalem was not yet awake, but Mary couldn't sleep. Her heart was broken – she was grieving because her beloved friend Jesus was dead. So in the darkness she made her way through the narrow streets, and headed to the tomb to cleanse and anoint his body. Out the gates she went, into the perilous countryside. There were no streetlights back then, and perhaps she didn't even carry a small lamp to light her path so that no one would take notice of her. She was, after all, a woman, alone – best not to draw any attention. Besides, she had been a follower and believer of Jesus, and that was dangerous right now. Would the authorities try to arrest her? Even Jesus' disciples were frightened and in hiding. As she journeyed along, she recalled everything that had happened just a few days earlier. The whipping by the Roman guards, the condemnation from the crowd, his suffering. And then at the end, when it was all over – the sight of his dead body being taken down from the cross. And now what had become of the hope that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior? Gone! Yet, how devoted a follower she had to have been. For despite her grief, confusion and even doubt, something inside Mary compelled her to continue on her journey. And what happens? As she's crying at the empty tomb, she turns and meets someone standing beside her. She thinks it's the gardener, someone who could maybe help her, show her where to find Jesus. But then, the man speaks her name, "Mary." And Mary realizes she is witnessing the impossible! It's Jesus standing there. And she cries out in joy, "Teacher!" And you can imagine her saying, "Jesus, it's you! It was you standing there beside me all along." And she runs back to the disciples, shouting, "I have seen the Lord!" He is alive. Alleluia!

Yes, what immeasurable joy she must have felt. A joy we too, should be feeling here this morning. Because Christ is alive! We've heard it, sung it, prayed it. And yet, in all honesty, the Easter story really does take us to the limits of faith and belief, doesn't it? Because we are asked to believe the impossible – a man has come back from the dead, risen out of the grave. But can it be true? Well, today, I want to take you on a journey. A journey that may be for you, like Mary's that morning. One that starts in darkness because of doubt or uncertainty or confusion in your mind about Jesus. But one, that I think will take you, like Mary, into the presence of the risen Lord. Let's begin.

Now the journey I'm speaking about is one that should be very familiar to you. It's a journey called your life. Because I think everywhere you travel on your journey, you will find Jesus is there. Now the most obvious times you'll meet Jesus are those times in life that feel sacred to you. Like a wedding, where his name is called on for blessings, as two people become one, and the presence of love is all around. Or at a funeral, where a loved one can be assured of his promise, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places and I go and prepare a place there for you." And there are other, less obvious places where his name may not be called, but where his Spirit is present. Like at the birth of a child... the miracle of life. Or even a playground where your children or grandchildren play and you are awed at their innocence and joy. And you remember how Jesus embraced the children and set them on his knees, saying, "You must change and become like little children to enter the kingdom of God." And you know in your heart he is right.

Yes, everywhere you turn in your journey of life you will meet this man Jesus. You'll meet him when, amidst the cacophony of sounds in this world shouting for power, revenge, war, hatred, greed, self, he is there proclaiming a different philosophy. He's the one proclaiming a doctrine of love and peace and acceptance – a way of life diametrically opposed to the world. Just listen: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Treat others the same way you want to be treated. Give generously, go the second mile, serve the least of these."

Yes, everywhere you go in your journey of life you will find this man Jesus beside you. When you're indifferent or uncaring toward another person's situation, there he is reminding you that we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan, "A certain man came down from Jerusalem to Jericho, or maybe it was Boston to Falmouth, and fell among thieves and was beaten and robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. And a stranger picked this man out of the ditch, cared for him and saved his life. And he says, "Now go and do the same." And we know he's talking to us. Or.. isn't it true that every one of us has criticized others for their shortcomings or mistakes, yet there he is, shattering our self-righteous pride with the words, "Let him who is without any sin cast the first stone." Shouldn't we drop those stones we're carrying right now. And when we think how smart we are building our lives and security on things of this world – money, possessions, status, there he is reminding us that his words and teachings should be the building blocks of our lives, because in the end, that's all that will matter. He says, "Everyone who hears my words and acts on them will be

like the man who built his house on a rock, and when the floods came and the winds blew, the house did not fall. But everyone who hears my words and does not act on them will be like the foolish man who built his house on sand. When the floods came and the wind blew, the house fell – and great was its fall.”

Yes, everywhere you turn in your journey of life you will meet this man Jesus. When you are feeling overwhelmed, and weighed down by all the pressures of living – the demands put on you, the expectations of others, health issues, there stands Jesus Christ, in his humanity, having experienced those exact same pressures, calling to you, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened, and you will find rest for your souls.” When you are filled with shame or regret over mistakes you've made, or for something you've said or done, and you feel that you are unforgivable, there he is, reaching out in love and mercy, saying, “I do not condemn you. I do not condemn you. As far as the east is from the west, and as far as the day is from the night, your sins are forgiven. Just go and sin no more.” When you feel like the world has been turned upside down, with all its incivility, mass shootings, crazy leaders, hate crimes, fake hate crimes, cheating scandals, floods, tornadoes, fires and on and on, there stands Jesus, promising, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. You will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

And that's why the message of Easter is so important for us. Because on Good Friday two thousand years ago, he did exactly that. The forces of evil and darkness and despair of this world thought they had put an end to Christ when they crucified and killed him. They thought they had the final say. But did they? No! Jesus Christ proved the victor by overcoming the world and even death itself. Christ is indeed alive! And whether you've realized it or not, he has been there with you, along side you, on your journey of life. Because think about it for a minute... about all your blessings... about a time you found the strength you didn't know you had... or the time a light shone through your darkness... or when you experienced a peace that passes all understanding... or when you felt a joy that was so full and complete. Perhaps it was a voice or a summons... perhaps it was a nudge or a feeling... perhaps, maybe it was a burning in your heart. Now can you see that he was there? Now, on this Easter Sunday, can you shout out with Mary, "So it was you, Jesus... it was you, all along!"

Yes, Christ is alive! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.