In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is about the triumph of love. I do not mean all love, because, alas, it is possible to love greed and meanness and all kinds of wrong things. No, I mean the triumph of love for Jesus and for all love we can believe he smiles upon. He is risen, and he is on the side of love. My Bible text this morning, then, is that moving scene when Mary Magdalene first sees our risen Lord Jesus. The happy words go this way:

16Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). (John 20:16, RSV)

If ever you have been happy to see someone again in your life, I bet Mary Magdalene was that happy. Or even more so!

At the start of this morning’s Gospel Reading, we find that Peter and John – those foremost disciples – are not there. They are not at the tomb. I do not especially blame them for this. It is early, it is still dark, and the disciples are probably worn out from their sorrow and from the trauma of the crucifixion. They are probably resting somewhere, trying to regain some strength for a life now without Jesus. He has died. They witnessed it. They saw the removal of his body from the cross. Now, they figure they must go on without Jesus. So, Peter and James are not at the tomb. They are resting and praying or something.

But Mary is there. First thing, before the dawn has even arrived, she is there at the tomb. The cruel cross might have taken the life of Jesus, but the little Mary can have left, she means to have: she means to at least be near the body of her Lord. She means to be in his presence, even though she imagines him to be dead. It is the nature of her love. It is a love that goes on. It continues beyond the last heart beat.

Many of us have some feel for that sort of thing when we visit the grave of a loved one. Perhaps there is an instinct deep in our hearts – a quiet conviction that this death just is not right. Our love ought to be able to go on. It ought not to be disrupted by death. It is a little thing we can do, this occasional visit to the grave of loved ones, but we do it. As St. Paul says in the “great love chapter” – First Corinthians 13 [11], “… love never ends.” Mary’s love for her Lord has not ended. So she is there at this tomb, early, while it is yet dark.
Romantic love is often jealous. It does not want to share the beloved. But that is not the kind of love we see in that joyous moment when Mary hears her name and recognizes Jesus. This is a love that transcends jealous love. It is a love that is rooted in deep gratitude for the existence of the beloved. This is a love that it is happy for our world, because our world has the beloved in it. So Mary is happy because this world has Jesus in it again. She seems to rush to him. Jesus has to gently restrain her:

17Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17, RSV)

And then Mary is off to the disciples to tell them the good news. Her love for Jesus is not the jealous kind. Her love for Jesus is of the kind that is happy for everyone now that Jesus lives again.

Well, I have gotten ahead of myself a bit. Let us return to the story. Mary arrives at the tomb early, while it is still dark. She is dismayed to find the stone moved away from the tomb. She fears that the body of Jesus has been removed. So, she runs to Peter and John and tells them the troubling news. All three of them return to the tomb. Peter and the Beloved Disciple enter the tomb, see that Jesus is not there, and they go home.

They go home, but not Mary. The Bible says that Mary stands weeping outside the tomb. She seems unable to leave the place where she last saw Jesus. Her love is of that kind – the kind that will not let go.

Notice the next scene. She stoops to look into the tomb, and she sees two angels “sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet” (John 20:12). Angels! If I saw an angel, I’d probably faint and fall over. But Mary sees two angels and takes little notice of them. She just about disregards them. She does not care about angels. She wants Jesus! They ask her why she is weeping, and she explains herself, speaking of the one who really matters to her:

She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:13, RSV)

She has no time to ask those angels about mysterious and holy things – no time to ask about what heaven is like and so on. No time for that! She wants to know where Jesus is! As the old spiritual has it:

\[1\] A point made (more eloquently) by Spurgeon in his sermon "Magdalene at the Sepulchre: An Instructive Scene," 1889. Spurgeon also notes how hard it would be for Mary to take away the corpse of Jesus, but how that does not matter to her.
Give me Jesus,
give me Jesus.
You may have all the rest,
give me Jesus. (WOV 777)

Mary says that she will take away the body of Jesus. She is speaking to Jesus, but is unable so far to recognize him. She thinks him a gardener:

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” (John 20:15, RSV)

For all we know, Mary might have been a mere slip of a thing. Even for a grown man, it is hard to drag away the corpse of another grown man. But Mary has the strength of love. “Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Then Jesus speaks her name and she recognizes that it is Jesus himself. She dashes to him. It reveals her love for him. She is grateful that he is alive. She is very grateful indeed that this world has Jesus in it again.

And why should she not be grateful? When we first encounter Mary Magdalene, she is a person of terrible suffering. She was possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2). Let me remind you what it is like to have just one demon. At the foot on the Mount of Transfiguration, a father brings his son to Jesus and describes the havoc and harm of a demon. The father asks for mercy on his son and says that the boy is...

...sore vexed: for ofttimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. (Matthew 17:15, KJV)

In modern terms, we would probably say the boy has epilepsy. Glad to say, Jesus healed him. Well, he healed Mary Magdalene too. She had had seven demons. Life must have been almost impossible for her. Imagine someone overwhelmed by depression, addiction, schizophrenia, cognitive disabilities, emotional chaos, and so on. Yet, Jesus cured her of everything and restored her chance for a normal life. She became one of his followers. She was with him till the end. She was there at the foot of the cross when they took Jesus down. Now, on this happy Easter morning, she finds Jesus alive, never to die again. She finds the world better off. Jesus is in charge now and nothing can stop him. Not even death. This world is going to work out the way Jesus wants it to, and this is a reason to be happy.

The one God appointed to first proclaim the resurrection of Jesus was a woman. Mary Magdalene has long been acknowledged as “the apostle to the
apostles.” It seems right to me. As St. John tells the story, Mary Magdalene seems to love Jesus with a deep, grateful, and joyous love. It seems fitting, then, that she should a primary role in the announcement of good news to this world of ours.

Of all God’s creatures in this vast universe, we human are distinguished by the fact that God speaks to us. He speaks about all creatures – the camels, the bears, the lions, the stars and moons far off in space. He says “let them be,” and he cares and attends to each one. But to us humans, he not only speaks about us, but also to us. I hope he is speaking to you right now through this sermon and liturgy. And I do believe he is saying to your hearts, “Be a person of love this year. Indeed, be a person of love henceforth, even more than before, because it is right and safe to do so. Jesus will take care of you.”

Mary Magdalene’s love for Jesus was matched by joy at his resurrection. Her love for Jesus led her to run to the other disciples and tell them the good news about Jesus, and through them, to tell the whole world about Easter. Mary’s love is on the right track of things. Let us join her in joy at the resurrection of Jesus. Let us join her in loving Jesus. And let us join her in loving our neighbors in the name of our risen Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.