

I WAS THERE
Scripture: John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011
(originally written & preached Easter 2004)

It was the first day of the week. It was still dark and I went to the tomb of my Lord, but the stone had been rolled away. I discovered that my Lord had been taken away! It was enough that I had suffered the grievous loss through Jesus' death and now this! How would I find him – Who took him and Where have they taken him? You can imagine my horror, I'm sure.

Oh, excuse me – let me back up for just a moment –

I am one of the notable Biblical women. Some of my distinctions include: last at the cross of Jesus, first at his tomb and first to proclaim the resurrection—because Jesus appeared to me first!

I am Mary Magdalene, an ordinary woman who was healed by Jesus. You may recall reading of my healing in chapter 8 of Luke's Gospel: "Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the Good News of the Kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out and Joanna and many others."

As you can see, I was in a terrible state but I was healed by Jesus. I was the recipient of grace and a great salvation and my plan was to follow him and show him my deepest gratitude. I did just that; I followed him as he went about preaching, healing, and teaching, but I never dreamed of the opportunities that I would have to minister to him and to show my gratitude to him! For you see, His love proved to be too powerful for the world; His love was deemed dangerous, so the plot began to unfold to arrest him and the

whole evil deed ended in crucifixion. Well...it didn't REALLY end in crucifixion, but at the time of his death, I thought it was the end.

Yes – I was there when they crucified my Lord.

Yes – I was there when they nailed him to the tree

Yes – I was there when they pierced him in the side

Yes – I was there when the sun refused to shine

Yes – I was there when they laid him in the tomb

And Yes, I was trembling, trembling, trembling.

I was there when they laid him in the tomb.

I HAD to be there – I was devoted to this man who had saved me from my terrible state and all of the disciples seemed to be deserting Jesus at the time of his arrest and following, but I couldn't bear the thought of him being alone!

I was there at the cross with Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary, Clopas' wife and we did what we could to minister to him.

After he asked his Father to forgive them, for they knew not what they were doing, and after he gave up his Spirit, Joseph asked Pilate for Jesus' body, and laid it in a tomb.

I knew where the body was, so I went back to pay my respects to Jesus and, as I said earlier, he was gone – the tomb was empty! But---who would I tell?? Who would believe me? I was a woman in a patriarchal society, where women were subservient to men (obviously, women weren't subservient to Jesus, but we were subservient to most other men).

A report from me would have been questionable, especially this report that the tomb was empty – this report was of an extraordinary event that defied common sense. Who would listen to me? In light of this, I ran to get Simon Peter and another of Jesus’ disciples to verify my findings. They too saw the empty tomb and the linen clothes and they believed and went back home. Yes, they went back home. Alone, again, I stood weeping outside the tomb.

My level of despair was deepening. Jesus was dead and now his body had either been taken away by his murderers, grave robbers, or wild animals. The cries for his crucifixion and the sound of the crowds mocking him were drumming in my ears – it was beginning to be more than I could endure!

Still weeping, I stooped to look in the tomb and saw two angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been. They asked why I was weeping and I explained that they had taken away my Lord and that I didn’t know where they had laid him.

I turned around and spoke to a man who I thought was the gardener. My grief had blinded me and his questions could not penetrate my grief and confusion. He asked, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” My response was, “Sir, if you have carried him away, please tell me where he is and I will take him away.”

I still had no way to understand the significance of the empty tomb, so I assumed that the solution to the mystery of the missing body was in my control – I just needed to find out who took him, and where! Perhaps the gardener could help.

The next word this man spoke changed my world forever. The risen Lord called me by name and when I heard my name spoken in his voice I turned around and this time

recognized him as my teacher, not the gardener! Through the intimacy of my name, the reality of the resurrection was revealed to me.

When I heard my risen Lord's voice, my perspective on the events in the garden changed. I no longer understood the empty tomb as a manifestation of death, but as testimony to the power and possibilities of life!

Remember in the parable of the shepherd in chapter 10 of John's Gospel. Jesus said, "The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Jesus called Lazarus by name to summon him from the tomb, and now Jesus' voice was summoning me to new life!

Rather than holding on to him for myself, Jesus asked me to go and tell my sisters and brothers of the resurrection and of the new life with God and one another that is now available to all. Those who follow Jesus have become members of the family of God and Jesus. I was asked to go and share all of this good news!

I said to myself, "Right – I'm a woman. Everyone will believe me!" but I did as my Lord instructed me to do. I witnessed – witnessed to his resurrection. I went to the disciples and I exclaimed with a great affirmation of faith, "I have seen the Lord!"

Did they believe me, you may ask? The answer to this question is not recorded in the Gospels but we do have a clue...we remember the account of Thomas who said, "unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Friends, I share this account with you because I was asked by Jesus to witness for him, but I also share this account with you so that you may see how my faith grew and matured. I wanted to share my resurrection experience with YOU.

I was an ordinary woman, a sinner who was healed by Jesus Christ and I followed him to show him my gratitude. In my grief I searched for Jesus. I did not find him, but he found me and called me by name. My confusion and sadness at the empty tomb were transformed by Jesus, and He can transform your confusion and sadness and brokenness as well.

Jesus calls each of us by name (call names of folks in the congregation). Seek Jesus and he will call you by name and give you a task. We aren't all called to the same task. Some of us are called to teach Sunday School, some to help make worship more meaningful and alive by serving on the Worship Committee, some on Hospitality, some in finance or missions, but we are all called – we need only listen to hear the call. When Jesus calls us to do a task, a spiritual change comes over us and we are filled with Christ's love.

Each of us has the assurance of a resurrection experience when Jesus finds us and when we are obedient to our call.

Jesus called me to witness, "Go, tell the others" and I went forth in faith and I was able to exclaim, "I have seen the Lord – the Lord is Risen!" and the others were soon to join in: "He is risen indeed!"

Friends, my resurrection experience can be yours. I pray that my witness to you this glorious Easter morning will help each of you to seek Jesus, listen for him to call you by name, respond in faith and exclaim with the others: "He is risen indeed!"

As Christians, we believe in the resurrected Jesus Christ.

This faith will save. This faith will keep us. This faith can be tried. This faith will wait on the Lord. This faith will be victorious. This faith will move mountains. This faith will wait, endure and suffer. This faith makes all things possible.

Christ dwells in us by our faith. When Christ dwells in us we have the assurance, the certainty, and the confidence that we TOO will be resurrected, transformed and changed.

When Christ dwells in us we too can exclaim: He is risen, He is risen indeed!

Amen.