

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Her name was Lilian.

I think she must have been beautiful once, years before I met her. But when I came to know her, the dyed hair, the heavily rouged cheeks, and the large hats kept me from seeing her as she was. I really don't know what she looked like beneath the makeup, the covering up.

With everything she did she was saying no to growing old. No to losing her beauty. No to dying.

But the makeup, and the hats, and the saying no had no power to save her. I think I'll always remember her dying as one of the saddest times in my ministry.

Cancer killed her, slowly. When there was nothing left of her but skin stretched over a skeleton her heart kept beating day after day. No dignity, no beauty, only death.

Since the last Easter, you have been through a lot. Death has smothered those you love. Marriages have cracked, and broken. People you counted on have disappointed you. Travel over the last year in your mind, over the sadness - the weariness - the fear.

But you say, "I dressed up for Easter to forget about all of that. Winter is over. Let's smell the flowers."

It was dark when Mary came to the tomb. In her heart night was not over. In her heart the world was in the depth of winter, spring was not even a distant dream.

The tomb was empty. This was her report, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Not even the smallest hope was in her.

A little later she stood outside the tomb weeping. She looked in again and saw two angels where the body of Jesus had been. They asked her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

She said, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Still no hope in Mary.

She turned and saw Jesus standing there but she did not know that it was Jesus. He said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

But she did not even know her beloved Lord in her grief. Through her tears she saw only a gardener.

"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." And for her Easter began.

Though she could not keep him there, though she may have never seen him again this side of the grave, Mary's searching for a corpse had ended. Jesus is alive. God has won the victory over death.

Soon Jesus would appear to the disciples. He would invite them to touch the mark of the nails, the place where the spear entered his side. He would invite them to see everything death could do, to look at it, remember it. And to know that God was more powerful still.

Easter is not some makeup applied to cover over death. Easter is not pretending - forgetting. Easter morning is the moment when the very worst of suffering and death is conquered by God.

We have come here dressing our bodies in spring. But God has brought Jesus here to dress our hearts in joy.

In a moment you will come to this table. As Mary was looking only for a gardener, you may be looking only for bread and wine. But the very same one who called Mary's name will greet you here. "Receive me, touch me, let me enter into you," he will say.

"Cry your tears, people of God, but don't look for gardeners, look for me," says Jesus. "Hear my word, know I am beside you even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

"Do not be afraid, I am alive forever." Amen.