

Easter Sunday | Returning to Life

Friends and neighbors, what a joy it is to gather for worship today – a pause in our daily rhythms to come together and build a collective sense of hope on this celebratory Easter morning. We are on the live stream and in this house of worship – on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we are building community now and into the future. As we ponder together the story of Jesus' resurrection, I invite us to consider ways in which we, too, might return to life.

I welcome you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer. God, you are love more powerful than we can comprehend. You are the love that we feel sustaining us – day in and day out. Stir our heart and our minds this Easter morning as we consider how you open us to new life as we return to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to the journey of faith. We pray as followers of Jesus, who returned to life. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

On Easter morning, we have the opportunity to focus on the experience of one to whom Jesus returned – Mary of Magdala. Mary's work and the work of all of Jesus' disciples (from then through today and beyond) is to imagine and embrace the ways we can rise to new life.

Let's join Mary of Magdala at Jesus' tomb on that first morning of the week. It was not her first visit to the tomb. It had been a full and chaotic morning. Before dawn, she and several other women had approached the tomb with oils and spices for the purpose of anointing Jesus' body (that it, marking him as beloved) and preparing the body for burial. Shocked to find the stone rolled away from the tomb and the body missing, Mary hurried to report this disturbing information to Simon Peter and to John.

As the two men raced off to the tomb, Mary may have hustled along with them or she may have moved slowly behind. According to the story, once John and Simon Peter had surveyed the scene and gone home, Mary remained.

And this is the moment in which Mary models for us a first of three ways of returning – the way of returning to herself. The gospel writer shares, *“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.”*

Have you been in Mary’s shoes? Have you recently been so overwhelmed by the stress and struggle in your own family and/or in our society that you’ve found yourself finally standing still? Have you experienced a moment when you become fully present to your anxiety and grief – perhaps not leaning against a tomb but against a door frame, a kitchen counter, or with your head in your hands on your desk?

In “The Magdalene’s Blessing: For Easter Day,” Jan Richardson writes this about returning to ourselves.

*“So let the tears come
as anointing, as consecration,
and then let them go.”*

This Easter, may we learn from Mary the power of pausing to be fully present to our anxiety and grief.

A song from contemporary psalmist Richard Bruxvoort Colligan entitled “Always on the Way” has carried me through this Holy Week in 2025.

The first verse speaks to experiencing new life through self-compassion – the hope of something more through returning to oneself.

Richard sings, *“We thought that we were lost and then we closed our eyes
We thought that we were lost and then we closed our eyes
There’s more going on, more going on than we can say
We are always on the way, we are always on the way”*

May we, like Mary, begin to return to ourselves amidst the chaos and by finding moments to be fully present to our emotions, leaning into the love of God to sustain us – somehow, some way into the more that is going on – into newness of life.

Let's explore a second of three ways of returning – **that of returning to our neighbor**. We have many of them around us today. Having anchored herself in her own feelings and perspective, Mary could then lean outward and look for companionship. The gospel writer describes, *“As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb...”*

Have you been in Mary's shoes, actively being present to your experience of pain or grief, yet also venturing outward – maybe while still puffy-eyed with grief or red-cheeked with rage? What if we do not need to attempt to hide and cover up how we truly feel? In facing outward to look into the tombs of pain and loss around us, we will encounter our neighbor. The story continued:

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

How often have you realized that your assumptions about a neighbor – about their mindset, priorities, attitudes, even aspects of their identity – were way off once you made the effort to face toward them and care to see and hear who and how they actually are.

This Easter, may we learn from Mary the power of returning to our neighbor, encountering them as they are.

Jan Richardson writes to the power of embracing the possibility of companionship that comes through returning to our neighbor:

*“All you need to remember,” Jan writes,
“is how it sounded when you stood
in the place of death
and heard the living call your name.”*

Through whose voice or eye contact, through what neighbor's presence might God be calling you into new life?

The second verse of Richard's song speaks to experiencing new life through human connection – the hope of something more through returning to our neighbor.

He sings, *"We thought that we had failed and then we looked around
We thought that we had failed and then we looked around
There's more going on, more going on than we can say
We are always on the way, we are always on the way"*

And let's explore a third of three ways of returning – **that of returning to the journey of faith.** Mary had returned to herself, welcoming herself to be centered in her grief. And she opened herself to a return to the mysterious neighbors present at the tomb.

She had come in order to continue her path of discipleship, caring for Jesus' body after his death. Stripped of that opportunity, she began to look forward, knowing there was a new call on her life – one of continuing to share Jesus' message of love for all.

Mary models how it is absolutely ok to make missteps and not have all the answers as we move forward through the present chaos and grief. Sometimes, like Mary, we need to ask the really raw questions on our minds and hearts – the ones that tap directly into our pain: *"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."*

And when our returning (again and again) to ourselves and our neighbors begins to kindle our courage, we will be ever more ready to share the truth of God's love that sustains us. We heard, *"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord[!]'"*

Jan Richardson writes of the power of stepping forward, across each new threshold, returning us into our ever deepening journey of faith.

*“This is an invitation,” she writes, “a choice, a threshold, a gate.
This is your life calling to you
from a place you could never have dreamed,
but now that you have glimpsed its edge,
you cannot imagine choosing any other way.”*

And finally, the third verse of Richard’s song speaks to experiencing new life through openness to the Holy Spirit’s movement – the hope of something more through returning to our journey of faith. He sings:

*“Well, we thought we had arrived and then we felt the wind
We thought we had arrived and then we felt the wind
There’s more going on, more going on than we can say
We are always on the way, we are always on the way”*

This Easter, let’s lean into new life by returning to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to the journey of faith. God’s love will strengthen and sustain us, and that Love is counting on us. Amen.

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John 20:1-18, “The Magdalene’s Blessing: For Easter Day”