

Easter Day 2011

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

Good news, we like to think,
Is always welcome.
And so the good news we hear today
Must surely be welcome.
And so it is.

Jesus, who died on the cross,
Is alive and lives forever.
The love he embodies
Cannot be killed and kept in a tomb,
Because the love he embodies
Is the essence of the unquenchable source of all life.

Love is alive and lives forever,
And invites us to live in love.
This is good news.
That does not mean
That it is easy to hear.

Good news can be hard to hear,
Because it changes everything
as surely as bad news would.
Only no news keeps things the same.

Good news is the beginning of a journey into the unknown.
On that journey we bring with us the gifts of the past,
And we try to let go the damage of the past.
And we trust in the future – at least we hope we do.
But on the journey that begins with good news,
nothing is certain.

The story we hear today
Is a story of good news

Heard and claimed
And set loose upon the world,
Where it turned everything upside down,
And still does, if we let it.

That good news begins here,
In the garden
With Mary Magdalene,
The disciple who listens to the voice of love,
And sees the mystery revealed,
And speaks the truth.

How many of us have the courage of Mary Magdalene?
Good news,
We like to think,
Is always welcome,
But how many of us have the courage
To embrace the good news,
As freely and fearlessly as she?

Mary Magdalene's courageous gift was this:
When she heard Jesus say,
Don't hold onto me,
She understood,
And let him go,
So that new life could begin.

Mary Magdalene
Sees that the one she mistook for a stranger
is her dearest friend
And that, even though he is so transformed,
He is the Jesus who gave her life.
And then, she does not cling
To what she had known,
But she lets the risen Christ go,
And runs to tell the news.

Unless she lets him go,

And tells the news,
There is no good news to tell.
Until she recognizes that the Jesus she loved
Is now the risen Christ,
And shares that news,
He too is stuck in the past.

Imagine if she had said to the disciples,
I saw Jesus, but he was not the same,
And so I went away?
Imagine if she had said,
I saw Jesus,
But I tried to hold onto him,
And then he was gone again?

Then there is no story to tell today.

Instead she understood
That the good news
Had changed everything,
That there was no holding on to what had been,
As precious as it was.
And she followed the good news
Into the future, where there was nothing to hold onto,
And everything to hope for.

Anyone would want to cling
To the precious gift of the past,
Especially, perhaps, Mary Magdalene.
She had been the best friend of Jesus;
In his presence she had found everything
She ever hoped for,
And had no reason to expect.

I don't know what you've heard about Mary Magdalene,
But you can't believe everything you hear.

If you've heard she was a prostitute,

You don't have to believe it.
There is not a scrap of evidence to support it.

And if you've heard she was Jesus' wife,
You don't have to believe it.
Again, there is not a shred of evidence.

What we do know is this:
Mary, from the town of Magdala,
Suffered from some illness
That made her an outcast.

She was an outsider in every way.
Until Jesus healed her.

Then, freed from whatever had kept her locked up inside,
She became his disciple and friend,
His best friend,
According to early tradition.

It was good news when Jesus healed her,
The best news she had ever had.
And it brought change.
She had been an outcast,
And now she was part of a circle of friends.
She had been alienated,
And now she was accepted.
She had lived in darkness and confusion,
And now she walked in the light.

Mary of Magdala
was in many ways more ordinary
Than we often imagine.
Yes, she was healed by the hand of Jesus.
Yes, she was his friend.
And so are we.

If she was not a notorious sinner,

Or the unique bride of Christ,
She was, like me, and perhaps like you,
One more person
Who carried within her more darkness
than she could sometimes bear,
More fear than she could manage,
Loneliness, discouragement,
Disillusionment, sorrow.
If we recognize ourselves in her,
Then we can follow her to the tomb
Where she weeps in anguish
At the loss of love.

If we follow her,
Then we will be there
When she hears the voice
And turns, and sees the mystery.
The mystery is so great
That at first she cannot even recognize within it
The friendship and love
That had made her life worth living.
But then, through the surprise of the new,
She is able to recognize the gift:
The life that death cannot kill,
the life that makes new love
always and everywhere.

If we follow her,
We will be there,
Gazing at the mystery,
Yearning with her
To hold onto the one who makes us whole.
We will be there with her,
Trying to understand that the good news
Means that nothing will ever be the same.

If this is true for us, as it is for Mary of Magdala,
Then perhaps it is true as well for our bruised and breaking world,

A world where systems and nations
And the very fabric of the planet
Are sick, and perhaps dying,
And there is no way to hang on to what has been.
There is only a choice between death,
And new, changed, and at first unrecognizable life.

If this is true for our world,
As it is for our own lives,
Then perhaps it is true for our church as well,
For the church as a whole,
And for us, right here and now at St. Andrew's.
The past we share is precious.
But we cannot hold on to what has been.

This church made a courageous choice,
Five years ago, and three years ago,
To step out into the future,
To embrace a new and unknown life.
Sometimes it has been exciting,
And sometimes it has been scary.
Sometimes it is hard to see
The gifts of the past
Contained in the confusing present
And unknown future.

The only thing we can know,
Is that this is a story of faith,
Because you began it in hope
And we continue in hope,
Trusting that the one we cannot hold onto
Goes on just before us.

The risen one is always going out beyond us,
Leading us out into the unknown, bright future.

If we want to be with him,
Then, like Mary Magdalene,

We need to let him go,
So that he can lead us further into the future.

If it were up to us,
We would keep him right here,
Safe and sound,
So that things would always be alright.

But the miracle we see today
Is that it is not up to us at all.
If it were,
Then the tomb would be sealed,
And the stone securely in place,
And we would tend our memories with loving care.

The miracle is that there is more to life than that.
There is more life than that.

We just have to let it go
So that we can follow it.