

April 5, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Easter Sunday

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.”

John 20:11

When I was a kid, I remember having what some people describe as the “Sunday scaries”: a feeling of dread which descended on Sunday evenings, a kind of anticipatory anxiety about the upcoming school week. All that homework, having to get up super early on school days, combined with a longing for the more relaxed pace and free time that weekends bring.

But my dread was somewhat mitigated by the Sunday evening television lineup: Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom, followed by the Wonderful World of Disney.

The Disney movies were always great, but I really loved Wild Kingdom. I loved learning about the exotic animals, and tried to imagine myself riding around the African or Australian or South American wilderness in an open-topped Jeep with host Marlin Perkins narrating all the creatures we’d see.

I wanted to *be* there, in person, in part because I wanted a chance to stop what was a frequent and seemingly inevitable scene in the show. The camera would pan across a herd of graceful gazelles or antelope, running free, and then, at the edge of the herd, you'd see it. A lion, or a cheetah, perhaps, chasing down one member of the herd. The slow runner, the one who couldn't keep up. The predator would zero in on that one gazelle, cut it off from the rest of the herd, and if they couldn't outrun it right away, they'd bide their time and wait for the creature to trip and fall, or panic and try to double back.

I struggled to understand why Marlin Perkins and his crew didn't step in to save the targeted gazelle, whose only fault was being a bit slower than its herd-mates. (My bleeding heart developed early.)

As a kid who grew up in the suburbs, where pork chops and chicken legs came neatly wrapped in plastic from the grocery store, I didn't understand the realities of the food chain in the wild—or how the meat I was eating came to be. But I *definitely* recognized the pattern of the powerful targeting the weak one. The slow runner. The outlier. I recognized the danger born of isolation, of being cut off from your herd, your community. It was

a pattern that played out in the school lunchroom, and on the playground.

And for a long time, I held out hope that the powerful playground bully going after the one who couldn't quite keep up....I held out hope that that was a kid thing, something we'd grow out of.

Then I grew up, and I learned that wasn't the case. I learned a new term for how this pattern often shows up in the adult, human world: the word "Empire." Borrowing from the writer, Kat Armas, empire is about systems—structures—of "power and domination, homogeneity and hierarchy, conquest and violence."¹ It's the idea that some people feel entitled or destined or anointed to take that predator/prey scene from the Wild Kingdom and apply it to human interactions. Because they've somehow accepted and internalized the notion that certain people matter less than others. Because they benefit from the arrangement. Because they feel powerful doing it. Because they can.

Empire is the thing that Jesus railed against throughout his ministry, working to upend the rules and systems that isolated,

¹ (p. 15, Liturgies for Resisting Empire)

marginalized, and exploited the sick and the poor, the widows and prostitutes and tax collectors.

Battling that empire is what got Jesus killed.

And when the empire killed Jesus, they thought that was the end of it. Without their leader, this fledgling movement of disciples and followers would surely fall apart. Those who'd been part of Jesus' inner circle were likely fearful Jesus' fate would become their own. Empire's assumptions seem spot on: after Jesus is arrested, the disciples scatter. Peter denies ever knowing him, multiple times. And after Peter and another of the disciples visit the tomb and find it empty, our gospel text tells us that they went back to their homes, alone.

The pastor and writer, Joe Smith, reflected on the nature of isolation in an article I read recently. He talked about how isolation can make “you feel like what you're carrying is yours to carry by yourself, ...convinces you that whatever is happening out there is too big, too overwhelming, too entrenched for anything you do to matter.” Smith also points out that, “isolation isn't accidental. It's a feature of empire. Because when people feel alone, they're easier to control. When people feel disconnected, they're easier to exhaust. When people feel like they're the only

ones who see what's happening, they start to question their own instincts. And when that happens, resistance doesn't just slow down... it starts to disappear altogether. Empire doesn't need to silence everyone. It just needs to separate us.”²

When Mary Magdalene stands outside of the tomb, everything about the scene is isolation. The other disciples have gone home. Jesus' body is gone. The angels she encounters provide little comfort or satisfaction. Mary is physically alone, emotionally disoriented, spiritually untethered.

At one point she turns and sees Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him; she assumes he's the gardener.

Which isn't all that surprising, because that's what isolation does to us—it doesn't just separate us from others, it distorts our perception, making the familiar unrecognizable, clouding reality.

But everything changes with a single word: her name. Jesus says her name: “Mary.”

² [Joe Smith, <https://therealjoesmith.substack.com/p/they-want-you-to-feel-alone>]

Jesus doesn't offer an explanation or an argument, or proof: just recognition. And in that moment, Mary is no longer alone. Instead she is known and reconnected. Her isolation is shattered not because she figures it out, but because she is called into relationship.

Mary's experience at the tomb echoes something much older—the heartbeat of covenant language throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, which we heard last night at the vigil and again this morning—“I will be your God, and you will be my people.” It's a refrain that shows up over and over, in Exodus and Leviticus and Jeremiah.

“I will be your God, and you will be my people.” At its core, that covenant is God's answer to human isolation. In Egypt, the Israelites are not just enslaved—they are cut off, dehumanized, and stripped of their identity. During exile, they are displaced, and wonder if they still belong to God at all.

Into that isolation, God speaks, telling the people that they are not alone, they are not forgotten, and they belong—both to God, and to one another. Covenant is not simply law or obligation; it is relational belonging as resistance to isolation.

Mary Magdalene thinks she is alone in a garden of death. Israel thinks it is abandoned in an oppressive world of domination and empire. And in both cases, God responds the same way: not with power, but with presence; not with explanation, but with relationship; not by removing all confusion, but by calling people back into belonging. By saying...

“Mary,” and...

“I will be your God.”

Both are acts of naming. Both restore identity. Both undo isolation.

Isolation tells us we are on our own—unseen, unknown, cut off. But the God of covenant is always moving in the other direction, calling peoples’ names, reclaiming people, reweaving connection. And sometimes resurrection begins not with splash and spectacle, but with the quiet, unmistakable moment when we hear ourselves called and realize we are not alone after all.

When Mary hears her name, everything changes. But notice this: she is not called out of isolation just to be comforted, she is called in order to be sent. “Go,” Jesus tells her. And the one who

had been weeping in the garden becomes the one who carries the news of resurrection.

The God who says, “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” never restores us only for ourselves. God gathers God’s people so that we might become a people—a people who resist isolation wherever it takes hold.

Which matters so much because isolation is not just something we feel, it is something our world keeps producing.

There are voices which divide us, systems that separate us, stories that tell us that we are on our own, that we don’t belong, that some people matter more than others. But resurrection rejects that story, and tells another. Resurrection calls people by name, and then sends them to call others.

So if you have heard your name, if you have known even a moment of being seen, of being held, of being claimed by a love that will not let you go, then you are part of this work now.

To notice who is still weeping in the garden.

To stand with those who feel alone.

To speak names that the world has forgotten.

To live like covenant is real: like we actually belong to God and to one another.

Because the good news is not just that Christ was resurrected all those many years ago. The good news is that the risen Christ is still calling, still gathering, still sending, until all have been named, and not one is left standing alone in the wildness of the garden. *Amen.*