

Date Preached	04-Apr-2021	Date Initiated	25-Mar-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Easter Day (ppl), Yr B*

" Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' "



Once upon a time, there lived a woman of great means. She owned an estate, with a palatial house, beautiful gardens and every comfort imaginable. Now, she wasn't unhappy or discontent. Friends and family came to visit frequently. She had a library full of books to read and was surrounded by beauty. And whatever her need or desire, one of her many attendants satisfied it, almost before she named it.

But neither was the woman fulfilled: Despite her comfort and contentment, there was an ongoing sense of something *lacking* ... something she should see or do or be ... but, for the life of her, she could not figure out how to fill that mild, but persistent, hole, right in the middle of her being.

Many years ago, she had decided that the hole was narrowness: The certainty and sufficiency of life on her estate pleased her, but perhaps they also suffocated her a little. So, she embarked on an extended tour of the known world. On her journey, she sketched ancient ruins and modern marvels; urban slums and gorgeous cathedrals; crashing ocean waves, mountaintop sunrises and endless, swaying fields of barley: images of things she'd never seen before and was grateful to behold. But back at home, the first time she sat down and opened one of her sketch books, she felt that hole—a quiet longing—right where it had always been.

Some years later, it came to her that the hole was self-centered-ness: She wasn't greedy, by any means, but perhaps her existence was too insular, not directed enough toward others. She asked the mayor and the priest and the doctor to visit her, and they told her of the poverty, hunger and sickness living just beyond her ivied garden walls. She was shocked and dismayed. Immediately, she made generous donations, founded an infirmary and directed her visitors to do everything they could ... and to ask her for whatever more was needed. The help she provided was substantial, and the townspeople's gratitude abundant. But still, that hole didn't go away. It had now become like some low-grade ache one gets used to: She didn't notice it most of the time, but then it twinged her when she least expected it.

A year or two ago, the woman suspected that the hole was a coolness of spiritual: She believed in God and attended church regularly, but perhaps she wasn't adequately attuned to God. She began praying regularly, several times a day, and reading spiritual books. She journaled after breakfast and hosted bishops and itinerant preachers at her dinner table ... questing to re-ignite the flame of her spirit and increase the passion of her faith. Now, we can't say this *didn't* help her spiritually, but still ... that hole. The once-achy twinges had now become like a dull headache that never goes away. "Why, O Lord," she prayed, "will you not take this hole from me? What *more* must I do to fill it?"

Then, one day, the woman caught a glimpse of the gardener working in the great east garden, and, not quite sure why, she sat down to watch him for a while. He did nothing unusual or grand, but every time the gardener completed a little task, the woman heard him murmur,

"Heaven." He'd dig a hole, and say, "Heaven." Plant a handful of seeds, and say, "Heaven." Wheel a barrow of manure ... "Heaven." Strain to remove a stubborn stump ... "Heaven." How remarkable!, the woman thought. He's doing nothing but mundane, repetitive chores—hands all dirty, back bent and the hot sun beating down. Where could Heaven be in *that*?

But as the woman continued to watch and listen, she began to understand: It wasn't his own *effort* the gardener was calling Heaven, but rather, the Heaven—the life ... the vitality... the joy—that he recognized in Creation itself. The gardener's fulfillment didn't require exotic destinations or lavish philanthropy or praying seven times a day. No, the woman realized, the gardener saw Heaven—*God's* Heaven—everywhere ... in everything. And this brought him boundless bliss.

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It can be hard to know exactly what to *do* with Easter. It's the culminating moment of the year and the summit of our entire faith: Christ risen from death and, in that Act of all acts, the *absolute promise* that we ... who are in, of and with Christ ... shall never die, but live, in God, forever. Alleluia and amen.

But is the import of Easter ... is the real 'worth' of Jesus' gift of eternity ... wholly deferred until our deaths ... akin to looking forward to a nice, long vacation—but only *after* we get through the next however-many years of emptiness and effort ... of persistent, unfillable holes? I don't think so.

When the Risen Christ encounters Mary Magdalen in the garden that first Easter dawn, He looks at her ... He names her ... and He *baptizes* her, with His eyes: transforming the tears running down her cheeks from sorrow to joy, from agonizing loss to perfect gain. In the font of her very tears, in the presence of the Living Christ, Mary is re-born ... is re-oriented ... re-located: still *in* this world but no longer *of* it. In Mary's Resurrection baptism, Jesus bestows upon her—and all of *us, too*—the grace, love and peace of Heaven: right here and right now. For death isn't the *beginning* of our eternal life in Christ, but only its *perfection*.

And knowing that Christ welcomed us into Heaven when we were baptized helps us understand those persistent holes we feel ... that we quest, in vain, to fill with 'more' or 'better' or 'deeper,' like the woman on the estate: They aren't actually holes at all. Rather, they are reminders from God that we, sisters and brothers of the Risen Christ, are *already living* our eternal lives: redeemed, reclaimed and reborn. Our feelings of emptiness and fruitless-ness, despite our endless efforts, are not maladies to be cured; not problems for us to *fix* ... but our souls' recollecting the eternity-with-God we've already been given and reminding us to *live* it, like the gardener: Each morning, another invitation to spend the day hand-in-hand with Christ ... and say, "Heaven." Each noonday, another opportunity to bless others with our kindness, compassion and love ... and to *be* blessed by them, as well ... and say, "Heaven." Each evening, a pause to praise God for the beauty of the day past (whatever its content), because God has been in every moment of it ... and say, "Heaven."

This Easter Day, we, too, come to the garden and stand at the empty tomb; we, too, hear Jesus call us by name; and we, too, are transformed, once again, from sorrow to joy ... from conflict to peace ... from want to abundance. Because anywhere in the garden we may look, we see only Heaven: the Heaven of the Risen Christ.



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* This sermon was loosely inspired ... somehow; in ways I am not fully aware of ... by lines 287-300 of Edward Young's (1683 - 1765) *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death & Immortality: Night IV. The Christian Triumph.*

O the burst gates, crush'd sting, demolish'd throne,
Last gasp, of vanquish'd Death! Shout, Earth and Heaven,
This sum of good to man! whose nature then
Took wing, and mounted with Him from the tomb.
Then, then I rose; then first humanity
Triumphant pass'd the crystal ports of light,
(Stupendous guest!) and seized eternal youth,
Seized in our name. E'er since, 't is blasphemous
To call man mortal. Man's mortality
Was then transferr'd to Death; and Heaven's duration
Unalienably seal'd to this frail frame,
This child of dust. — Man, all immortal, hail!
Hail, Heaven, all lavish of strange gifts to man!
Thine all the glory; man's the boundless bliss.