

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Old Chapel, Millwood, Virginia
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

(John 20:1-18)

A few days ago a friend and former seminary classmate shared a meme on Facebook that consisted solely of this text:

Keep calm and dramatically adjust your expectations.

The first two words – “keep calm” – were in a larger font and so naturally they stood out. They’re certainly a good reminder to all of us ... a reminder that has been useful throughout the past year in which so much has been turned upside down – a year in which the light of calm was blotted out by the darkness of anxiety.

Anxiety about illness. Anxiety about separation from one another. Anxiety about the steps taken by priests and bishops to keep congregations safe. Anxiety about the various types of loss many have experienced: the loss of routine; the loss of a sense of safety; the loss of friends and loved ones to the pandemic; the loss of jobs and income; the loss of feeling like control is ours; the loss of much that brought normalcy to our lives.

But perhaps the more important focus in the statement shared by my friend should be on the final words: “dramatically adjust your expectations.” When I took time to begin considering those, I also began to consider the experience of Mary Magdalene in today’s Gospel reading.

When Mary set off for the tomb very early on that third day ... waking and walking to the tomb even before the sun had risen ... her expectations were low. The alternate Gospel reading for this morning from Mark had her going to the tomb with two other women to anoint the body of Jesus with spices, and while this reading doesn’t overtly mention that goal we can imagine the writer of John had that same mission in mind. She wasn’t going with the expectation of witnessing any sort of miracle. She couldn’t have thought she would see an empty tomb. She wouldn’t have anticipated encountering two angels telling her that her friend had risen. I certainly don’t think she in her wildest imagination would ever have set off thinking she would see the risen Christ standing outside the tomb, or hear him call her name.

Mary.

Yet all of this happened ... and all of her expectations were *dramatically* adjusted. Her day started with the simple act of going to tend to the physical body of Jesus that had been laid in the tomb. It ended with the realization that death had been defeated, the Messiah had been resurrected, and the world had been changed *forever*.

Mary set off for the tomb that morning knowing that what had been experienced in the previous few days – the arrest, trial and death of Jesus and the flight into hiding by his disciples – marked the end of the *old*. What took place when she arrived at the empty tomb clearly showed her something *new* was happening... something incredible. She knew she

couldn't go back to what once *was*; now, she and indeed the entire world were moving into what instead *would be*.

So what about each one of us, here, this morning? Perhaps we have been too focused on the "keeping calm" portion of my opening statement when instead we should have been focused on the second part. Perhaps instead of expending so much emotional energy on returning to the way things *were* we should instead dramatically adjust our expectations and look for the way things *could be*.

Mary knew there would be no going back ... and for us, going back isn't possible. We can *return*, certainly: return to our church building and our services and activities; return to many of the things in life that we're used to experiencing; return to time together with family and friends; return to the joys of travel. But make no mistake: *we can never go back*. On this Easter morning at the end of a full year of pandemic, we have walked in the footsteps of Mary to an empty tomb. We have heard the voice of Jesus calling each one of us by name. We realize that from this point on we can only go forward.

So how do we do that ... how do we move forward? I think the answer to that is to look at what brought Mary to the tomb in the first place: *we care for the body of Christ*. *Everyone* sitting around you here this morning; *everyone* you encounter in the world; friend and stranger; rich and poor; powerful and powerless; allies and opponents: all of them ... *all of them* ... are the body of Christ. On this resurrection morning we remember with joy that Jesus was taken down from the cross on Good Friday and was raised on the third day. How do we move forward? We live and act in ways towards one another that embrace his resurrection rather than acting in ways that re-crucify and re-entomb him.

How do we move forward? We bring love wherever there is hatred.

How do we move forward? We pardon those who have injured us.

How do we move forward? We share our faith with those living in doubt.

How do we move forward? We bring hope to the places and spaces filled by despair.

How do we move forward? We bring light to people living in darkness.

How do we move forward? We bring joy to those experiencing sadness.

How do we move forward? We stop focusing on expecting others to understand us and focus instead on trying to understand them.

How do we move forward? Simply, we love one another and give of ourselves for others, in the same way that Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

Keep calm and dramatically adjust your expectations ... and watch the risen Christ change the world forever.

Amen.