

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

Supposing Him to be the Gardener

John 20:1-3, 11-18

June 1, 2025

When I was a young girl, I had a dream that I was called to ministry. It was cloudy—literally. I dreamt I was surrounded by dark clouds. Then a glowing, human figure took my hand and said, “Follow me.” He walked with me a while, and the dark skies gave way to blue. Then he said, “Look behind, around you.” I turned and saw the others. He said, “This is what you will do.”

Was it a call? Or just the fantastical dreaming of a child? I didn’t know how to categorize it. So I brought it to my youth pastor at the time, Rev. Miriam Mauritzen. She invited me on a walk. It was not just to discuss my dream. It was also to go over my recent confirmation exam. For any recent confirmands, yes, we had exams—three of them. And in that particular exam, I had questioned how that stone could have been rolled away. It struck me as scientifically impossible.

So, we walked through the neighborhood streets and down to a nearby field. Miriam didn’t laugh off my dream. She didn’t dismiss my doubts. Instead, she held them both gently, reverently. She encouraged me to *wait and see*. To lean into the questions. To trust that resurrection might someday show up in my own life, and that one day the stone that seemed so immovable might no longer be a stumbling block.

I think that was one of the most important walks of my life. Not because I gained definite clarity of call or mastery over the scriptures, but because someone invited me to notice the mysterious ways God reigns over our lives. In dreams and visions, in doubts and questions, in moments of sorrow and seeds of new life. And most importantly, she charged me to move toward the mystery with *curiosity*.

So, when asked what scripture had most shaped me, I thought of Miriam walking with me in that field. And then

I thought of Mary. Mary in the garden with the empty tomb. I thought of her grief and of her questions.

Mary does, after all, show up to grieve. She comes in the dark, still reeling from loss. And when she sees the stone rolled away, her first instinct—much like mine was as a child—was to reach for explanation. She assumes grave robbers.

“They have taken the Lord,” she tells the disciples.

“They have taken away my Lord,” she weeps to the angels, “and I do not know where they have laid him.”

The first time that I was asked to read this scripture in worship, I choked my way through it. “I do not know where they have laid him.” I recognized in her words of grief a sort of gumption—a grief that goes seeking. She didn’t know where he was, but she was going to find him.

And we might deny it, or try to explain it away, or numb it out, but I suspect we all show up at church on Sundays carrying the same question: where is he?

Where is Jesus in this broken world? In this broken moment? In my own life? In the turmoil of the lives of those I love?

Even the actor Jim Carrey once asked in an interview with Newsweek, “What is up there? What’s God? I’ve spent my whole life wanting the roof to be torn off this thing. For somebody to say, ‘Yeah, there’s a God. Don’t worry about it. You’re taken care of.’”¹

So, some of us come with doubts like Jim Carrey’s. Some of us come like Mary—faithful, grieving, and seeking to make sense of the mess. And we miss the Living Christ standing right there in front of us.

We suppose he's just the gardener. We suppose the stone can't be moved. We suppose that dream was just a dream. But what if we supposed wrong?

For when Mary hears Jesus call her by name, everything changes. She doesn't recognize him until that moment—until he speaks to her grief. He doesn't begin with theology or proof. Not even with an answer. He starts with a question. "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?"

In the most transformative moment in history, God's very self pauses to ask about Mary's pain. It's not an interruption to resurrection—it's part of it.

This is the mysterious way of faith. She shows up in sorrow. She leans into the questions. She waits and listens. Before she can go proclaim, "I have seen the Lord," she has to grieve the atrocities her friend endured, grieve a world that scapegoats its own savior in the name of power. She must cry out and reach for him, for only then can she release the Lord she follows and go where he commands.

Joan Didion writes about the death of her husband in her classic memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. "We try to keep the dead alive in order to keep them with us. But if we are to live ourselves, we must at some point relinquish the dead, let them go."

Or in my favorite young adult novel, *A Monster Calls*, we learn that the young boy, "Conor held tightly onto his mother. And by doing so, he could finally let her go."

Yes, Jesus meets us, holds us, right there in our grief. And he says to Mary then, "Do not hold onto me." Not because he doesn't care, but because something new is beginning.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day we remember that Jesus has ascended to God, sitting at the right hand of the Father, to reign over all creation. Which means it's also the strange day where we remember that his physical body is no longer here, already gone ahead of us, always ever on the move.

And we're invited to follow him—not by clinging to what was, but by listening for his voice in what is. In our grief,

in our questions, in our places where resurrection seems downright impossible. To trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in and through the soil of these, our very souls, stirring up something miraculously new right here.

And I share all this not because I'm good at following Mary's directions, but precisely because I tend to resist the letting go, the leaning into the questions. The young girl that went on that walk did not run toward the call. In fact, I first wandered away to boarding school for ballet and then to Indiana University where I eventually landed, by God's grace, in Tony Ardizzone's writing workshop. Reading my short stories and essays, he identified my resistance to grief and questions. I wasn't much for ambiguity. I had a preference, and still do, for mastery over mystery.

He called me into his office and said, "You, Gracie, have a Jesus problem. You keep writing around faith. And there's a lot of grief there, a lot of questions, and I need you to write directly into them."

As he coached me in writing, he probably got a lot more than he bargained for, because he ended up having to walk with me in my life as well—through the wilderness of my undergraduate career. He held my questions and grief with reverence, and he watched as I experienced the resurrection that Miriam had anticipated I would experience.

I'm grateful for Tony because I've found the words of the Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr to be true: "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it."

Our grief, the long arm of love, it matters to God. And we can't master it by suppressing it or avoiding it, stuffing it down as much as I try. That's when it leaks out sideways and harms our souls and others. Many terrible ills have happened throughout history—and continue to this day—because of people of relative power with unaddressed, unexamined pain.

But Mary. Mary teaches us how to show up to the mystery of suffering. She was there at the cross three days prior. She witnessed her Lord, our Lord, absorb the suffering of the world. She is here in the garden, leaning into the tomb, crying out for our Lord. She realizes she

isn't in control, so she asks for help, willing to wait and see what will happen next.

And what happens next—her being sent to proclaim the good news that the Lord is risen and loose in the world—is a reminder that getting close to our grief is not actually an exercise in navel gazing. It is not for ourselves alone. Hardly. It is so we can be sent out, caught up in the great mystery of Christ's resurrecting work.

And this is the mystery of faith: she didn't even know it was him, but he already knew that her tears would water the soil of our faith for generations to come. Her pain, transformed. A testimony that has stood the test of time.

If we want to be transformed and want to be agents of transformation in the world, I fear, friends, we must open the garden gate of our grief and suffering. We must bring it to God. We must name it in community. This is why Second has prioritized support groups for various types of grief, why so many of you have lived your lives in deep relationship with others through small groups and Bible studies. And if you haven't yet, I encourage you to find brave spaces where you can be honest, and fully known, and fully loved.

After all, as the writer Rachel Held Evans once wrote, "God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life... so if you want in on God's business, you better prepare to follow God all the way to the rock-bottom, scorched-earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world—including those in your own heart—because that's where God gardens."

So how do we listen for God in order to labor with Christ in the garden? How do we hear our name called in a world groaning so loudly with grief?

Mary gives us a model. Grieve and lament what has been lost. Gather with others. Get close to the questions of greatest importance.

There's a story of a Spanish-Salvadorian Jesuit priest, Ignacio Ellacuria, who was the martyred president of the University of Central America in San Salvador. He was teaching other priests what they ought to do when faced

with the gardens of grief. He said, "I want you to set your eyes and your hearts on those people who are suffering so much—some from poverty and hunger, others from oppression and repression. Then, standing before this people thus crucified, you must ask yourselves: [how have I contributed to the forces that] crucify them? What do I do to uncrucify them? What must I do for these people to rise again?"²

This is the witness of a church that moves toward suffering because our hope is secure in the resurrection. That is a grief that has gumption, that goes looking for God with the confidence that God will be found.

Miriam, my youth pastor with gumption, who was not afraid of mystery, would go on to support members of her congregation in Montana as they began a ministry with a group of young skateboarders. Serious Juju, they call it. It came about because the church members noticed a group of young teens were constantly skateboarding around the church. So, by God's grace, instead of shaking their fists at those kids on their lawn, they got curious. They started to notice the kids didn't seem to go home at dinnertime. Some of them didn't even go home at night.

So, they started to feed them. The number of kids grew upwards to 75. They waited, and they listened. They began to hear stories from these kids and young adults of major obstacles in their lives. Hunger, poverty, unstable and abusive families. And they asked, "What must we do for these children to rise again?" And the kids taught *them* about skateboarding, grief, and getting back up after a fall.

In the warehouse with ramps and pipes that they eventually built with these kids, there's a giant cross made from broken skateboards. And in Miriam's words: "We take our broken skateboards, and we put them on the cross... and we talk here about brokenness. Christ teaches us that we put it here. We can share it in community. We embrace our pain until it becomes wisdom and a key for someone else."³

She knows, and those skateboarders know, that the God who calls us by name, who rolls stones away, who reigns in dreams and doubts, in gardens and warehouses

of grief—this God meets us right there. This is where resurrection happens.

So, siblings in Christ, let's get close enough to listen. Amen.

¹ Jeff Giles, "This is Your Life" Newsweek (June 1, 1998): pp. 62-63.

² *The Cross Examen*, Roger Gench

³ <https://faithandleadership.com/eat-pray-skate-skateboarding-ministry-offers-unconditional-love-teens>