

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Good morning. **Happy Easter!** Here we are: Easter Sunday; the day in the calendar each year that is for some about special duds, for some about kinda scary weird bunny people your kid can pose with at the mall, a day for many that features eggs and chocolate, and also **the day of the year considered most central and sacred in the Christian faith.** It's the day that centers around a bold, illogical, mind-boggling assertion that the first century rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified on a cross by the Romans, did not stay dead, but **rose again on the third day, releasing hope, spiritual power, and a living connection to God now available to everyone.**
1. It's a story that I know is likely familiar, at least in its essentials, to many of us. And some of us may **feel in our bones the genuine truth of it** - we have come too far and seen too much in this life of Jesus-centered faith, we can't help but boldly and gratefully proclaim "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"
 2. Others of us, if we're honest, **may feel more skeptical about the day.** Perhaps we have no problem acknowledging Jesus the teacher or Jesus the prophet. We know he was a person who inspired multitudes and his wisdom, commitment to non-violence, connection to the Divine and embodied love are all sources of spiritual inspiration and life, but the assertion that he literally rose from the grave might feel more mythic than factual.
 3. And then some of us may feel **somewhere in the middle**, sensing on some core level a hope in the reality of resurrection, but feeling unclear about what to do with it; how to allow that resurrection truth to transform our own losses into new life.
 4. **Wherever you're at**, whether I've named it perfectly or not quite, I want to acknowledge that **you are welcome here, and to declare that you belong.** This celebration isn't just for those who feel the most joyful in the Easter hope we proclaim. It's not a party for the confident. It's an invitation for the curious, for all who resonate with the hope of possibility - that maybe, just maybe in connection with the Divine and one another there might be more to life than we are aware of or can fully understand.
- B. So today, I'm going to invite you to **revisit this familiar Easter story** with an encouragement to hold curiosity and a spirit of openness, and join me as we see what new understanding, and perhaps even experience of faith, may come.

- II. Now before we look to this story afresh, I want to start by **introducing us to a central character** in it. I'm going to give you some background on this character first, because I think that might help us consider the story through a different lens.
- A. Today's Easter text is the account of the resurrection told in the first part of the gospel of John, chapter 20. It's a story that follows the activity not first and foremost of Jesus, *he* is not the protagonist in this story. Rather, in this part of the narrative, **John's leading character is a she** - a woman whom the text names as Mary Magdalene.
- B. Likely you've heard of this woman, even if you haven't spent much time in church - she's been a part of popular imagination around the story of Jesus for awhile. I'm kind of a music theatre nerd, so in **Jesus Christ Superstar**, she's the ingenue whose majorly crushing on Jesus and laments through a rock ballad, "I don't know how to love him". **In the novel and movie DaVinci Code**, she is Jesus' secret wife, mother of his child and embodiment of the Sacred Feminine. But none of these popular romantic traditions have much historical basis to them. Who knows, maybe Mary M. did have the feels for Jesus - I'm sure lots of folks did, right? - but that's **not something we can really determine** from historical documents or from the accounts in the New Testament.

- C. There's also been the confusion through the centuries **between her and other women in the gospels**, some of whom are also named Mary. Because of these associations, some readers of the Bible have believed Mary Magdalene to have been a sex worker, though there is actually no place in the gospels that say this. The synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - do tell us that **Mary Magdalene was one of the women who traveled with Jesus from Galilee and helped care for his practical needs**. Luke adds that Jesus had cast out seven demons from her once, so that's different. All of the gospels put her at the foot of the cross when Jesus dies and at the tomb on Easter morning.
- D. Still, more than two thousand years after these stories were originally written, it's been only in very recent years that there have been some **meaningful breakthroughs in the study of Mary Magdalene**. Turns out it's actually **important to have women doing Biblical research** because when they do, guess what? - they discover interesting things about women in the Bible. Things that scholars in the past, who were overwhelmingly male, seemed to have missed, perhaps because female scholars are more careful to look past patriarchal assumptions and dig deeper than the men who were doing this work were before (sorry guys, y'all know it's true). One of those women doing this important work is **Elizabeth Schrader Polczer**, and her focus of study is Mary Magdalene - understanding more about who she was and what she meant to the early church. And as I was reading about some of her work this week I learned that one of the most fascinating recent areas of study around this Mary is **connected to the second part of her name - Magdalene**.
- E. For centuries, the popular view that many have assumed to be truth is that Mary was called Magdalene because **she was supposedly from a place called "Magdala"**. Anyone who has visited the Holy Lands in our life time may have visited a site on the sea of Galilee that claims to be this place. But a recent examination of some of our earliest documents from the period closest to these events, really draws this assumption into question.
1. First, there's the fact that **we have no evidence that during Jesus' time there was actually a town called Magdala in Galilee**. That name doesn't show up on any maps or documents about the area until at least six hundred years after Jesus' life. And then there's the discovery that some of the earliest Christians, Church Fathers as they often call them, who wrote about the gospels understood Magdalene not to speak of where she was from, but of who she was. **Magdala was not a place but a description, a title**.
 2. You see the word **"magdala" in Aramaic actually meant "tower"**. And some of our oldest sources, church fathers like Jerome, clearly understood Mary's name to be a description of her importance. Many of us know the story of how Jesus' renamed one of his closest followers, a fisherman he met named Simon, but he added to it the name Peter, which meant literally, "rock". "On this rock," Jesus said, "I will build my church." Well, it turns out that Simon Peter may not have been the only disciple with a powerful new name that spoke to the early church of their significance. **Alongside Simon the Rock was Mary the Tower**.
- III. So this is the character - this Mary the Tower - that I invite you to notice and to consider as we read this story and wonder together what this tower might teach us today.
- A. ***Now very early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been moved away from the entrance. 2 So she went running to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out to go to the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached***

the tomb first. 5 He bent down and saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who had been following him, arrived and went right into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been around Jesus' head, not lying with the strips of linen cloth but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, came in, and he saw and believed. 9 (For they did not yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead.)

10 So the disciples went back to their homes. 11 But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent down and looked into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus' body had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary replied, "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!" 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Because she thought he was the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni" (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus replied, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene came and informed the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them what Jesus had said to her.

1. So this is our Easter story, following the experiences of whom at least some have called "Mary, the Tower". I'm gonna take some time to notice a few things that I observe about Mary in this story, and about what seems to set her apart from the other disciples, and then we'll think about what any of that might mean for us today.
- B. The first thing I notice that makes Mary unique in this story, is that **Mary is in touch with her longing.**
 1. It's Mary's longing that is the **catalyst for this story in the first place**. Something gets her out of bed before dawn. Something draws her in the dark to a lonely tomb. In other versions of this story, Mary comes with a small group of women to embalm Jesus, but in John's version, they have already treated the body, dressing him with myrrh, aloes and spices and wrapping him in cloths Friday before he was buried. Perhaps she is coming that day longing to do another round, to touch him and tend his body further - or maybe it is something else that John understood brought her there - a longing simply to be near the place he was laid.
 2. As the story unfolds, Mary's longing **carries forward the action**.
 - a) Her longing compels her to run for the others when she finds the stone rolled away.
 - b) Her longing keeps her there, even after the others walk away.
 3. And it is the longing of Mary that **seems to be felt by the sacred**.
 - a) Not everyone seems to respond to Mary's longing with compassion. Peter and the unnamed disciple, commonly accepted as John, **come off as pretty dense here**. They seem more focused on their footrace - who can get to the tomb fastest- than

who brought them there and how is she doing. Mary has run to them, woken them up before the sun has even risen, brought them to the grave, shown them Jesus' body has disappeared and how do they respond to her? They don't seem to notice her or her emotion at all. There's no words of comfort to her, no embrace, no thank you for alerting them to the situation. They simply arrive, see the empty tomb, and seem to walk away scratching their heads, believing something has taken place, but exactly what at this point seems pretty unclear. They're certainly not rejoicing in the good news of the resurrection.

- b) But while these bros are caught up in their own experience, ignoring Mary, **the Divine is moved by her longing**. The Divine concern comes from two different places in the story - first from a pair of angels who mysteriously appear only to Mary. And then from Jesus himself. All of the sacred voices express their care and compassion as they ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

4. **Mary is in touch with her longing.**

- C. The second thing I notice about what makes Mary unique here is that **Mary is persistent**.
1. She's not just walking away saying "Huh, that's weird. Oh well." Shrug emoji.
 2. No, she's active and stays active. She runs for help. She runs back there after the guys. She searches when they walk away. She pleads with anyone she encounters. She stays. Yes, she's weeping. She's scared. She's grieving. But she persists. Mary is persistent.
- D. And that brings me to the third thing that I find provocative about Mary in this story - **Mary engages with mystery**.
1. I don't know if you all are noticing, but Mary is encountering some weird stuff in this story. The tomb with the stone rolled away is certainly mysterious, but it gets stranger after that. After the guys leave, Mary pokes her head in the tomb and encounters two angels! She doesn't fall over in fear, she doesn't say, "OMG you're angels." It kind of makes you wonder if she realized who she was talking to at all. But whatever she's thinking about these strangers who have appeared out of nowhere, she doesn't shut down or run away; she engages. She answers their questions. She is present to them.
 2. And **this interaction with the angels is just the prelude**. After answering the two mysterious beings, she turns and finds another. This person asks her not only "Why are you weeping?" but "Who are you looking for?" Mary doesn't realize the very person she's been searching for is the one asking her the question. **She's encountering her longing but it's different than she expected**. He is different than she expected.
 3. The encounter with the risen Jesus himself is **very mysterious**, Mary sees Jesus but can't perceive him. He is somehow transformed. Her eyes don't recognize him and she mistakes him for a gardener.
 4. But the encounter is also **intimate**, and it's the expression of intimacy, clothed in mystery that brings recognition. He speaks her name, "Mary", and something profound registers. She understands something in her heart and spirit that are different than what she perceives with her senses.
 5. "Rabboni" Mary responds, an Aramaic word that our text says means, "teacher". But it's not a word we're used to. It's not "rabbi" which is generally what Jesus' followers say when they want to call him "teacher". And actually **this word is also a subject of recent scholarship by people like Elizabeth Schraeder Polczer**. It turns out that many of the earliest manuscripts we have of John in ancient Greek translate the word differently, to mean not a human teacher but a teacher who is Divine. Some versions of this passage actually say "Rabboni" means "Lord". All of these variations matter because **they point**

to Mary having an *aha moment*, a moment of spiritual clarity that neither Simon Peter nor John had when they approached the tomb. She is registering that Jesus is no longer dead, but he is here - alive but also transformed. Teacher but also now Lord in a new kind of way.

6. As a result of all of these movements, Mary being in touch with her longing, Mary persisting, Mary engaging with mystery - **Mary, too experiences transformation**. She is moved from grief to joy, from despair to hope. From need to abundance. She started the story running to the other disciples for help. She ends the story running off to *help them* by sharing what she has seen. On this Easter morning in this garden encounter, **Mary is built into the tower of faith** that it seems the early church looked to and honored. **She becomes an apostle** - which in Greek means "a sent one". Not only *that*, she is Jesus' chosen apostle to the apostles.

IV. So what does all of this mean for us here at Haven on this Easter Sunday? In recent months, including throughout the season of Lent, I've had the opportunity to have a **number of conversations and spiritual discerning experiences with folks in this community** around what people long for or feel stirred by for Haven in this season. I'll be sharing more of what I've been hearing, discerning and discussing with other leaders in the weeks to come, but one of the themes that feels like an important focus this year for Haven I'll name now. I'll call it "**Growing In Spiritual Connection**".

- A. That might sound like a no-brainer to folks in a lot of faith communities - spirituality is a core part of why we're here right? - but if you've been around Haven a little while, you've probably noticed we're kind of a unique group as far as churches go. We've talked through the years about trying to be a community that values safety, diversity and Jesus-centered spirituality, and attempting to hold those together has meant **we've tried to make a lot of space for wherever folks are coming from, just like we name in our opening prayer**. Specifically, our commitment to full inclusion means we have a number of folks in our community who have been **hurt in other spiritual communities** that have not included and affirmed their full selves, and they bring that hurt with them. This has meant at times we've felt cautious to know how to foster meaningful spiritual experiences in ways that feel safe and open and powerful without **triggering places of trauma** or wounding. And while that care and concern is an important expression of love, I think we all have a desire to still move forward in establishing a meaningful connection with the Divine that feels true to who we are as individuals and as a community, and is spiritually powerful; to not allow our caution to keep us from opening ourselves up to something transformative and beautiful. **We long to grow in genuine spiritual connection**.
- B. This is one of the felt needs I think we've been leaning into throughout Lent with the "**Seeking Sundays**" we've done here, in which we took time out to pause some of our other Sunday activities and hold a more open stance of contemplation and listening for the Divine together. I think it's connected also to what's been drawing folks in recent weeks to Albany on Monday nights, **as a small group of us** have been engaging around the theme of **discerning God's presence together** there. We will continue this year to look for more places to practice and lean in; to grow in spiritual connection together.
- C. And one of the ways we'll do that in this Sunday morning space is through a series of teachings around fostering an interactive relationship with the Divine **through experiences of prayer**. We'll be looking at different characters in our sacred texts, as well as examples from more contemporary life, so we can consider what developing an accessible, grounded,

authentic to-who-we-are and the-cultural-moment-we're-living-in kind of prayer life could look like. I'm calling this series "**Dialogue with the Divine**".

- D. And that brings me back to Mary Magdalene and our Easter story. In some ways this story might not seem relevant to the topic of prayer, but **I see it a bit differently**. This moment that is being described is a **transition moment**. This is not about interacting with Jesus as a human being interacts with another human. That's the kind of relationship Mary had with Jesus before he was captured, mocked, and then gruesomely lynched before her just days before. No, this kind of interaction Mary is having with Jesus is something different; it is a new Easter kind of spirituality. It's the spirituality of resurrection. This is not interpersonal dialogue; this is dialogue with the Divine. And as we begin our own exploration of what a post-Easter spirituality might look like, I think **Mary the Tower provides an important model**.
- E. You see, **towers are different than foundational rocks**. Both are needed, but they serve different purposes. The foundational rock, rocks like Simon Peter, provide a steady base layer for things to be built upon. They bring stability to what is being constructed. But a **tower serves a different purpose**. A tower draws your eyes skyward, not to what's underneath you but to what is possible ahead of you. It also orients you in the landscape. It helps you find your way. One thing I love about living in Berkeley is that from many parts of the Bay, I can quickly identify where my home is. When I'm in San Francisco I can look across the Bay and as I scan the skyline, I can easily find Berkeley. How? **I spot the Campanille** - the bell tower on the UC Berkeley campus. It's also known as Sather Tower. This Tower stretches upward and shows me the way home. Towers are sources of both inspiration and orientation.
- F. And so it is, when I ponder this story and the role of Mary the Tower. This is **a woman who has known spiritual trauma**. She has seen one of her closest friends sell out her beloved teacher and leader. She's seen the other friends and follower, sorry to day it, but once again all the guys, scatter or even deny they knew him when their safety was on the line. But she, with other women who loved and followed Jesus - they stayed. They watched the whole brutal thing. They refused to look away while the life was crushed out of him. **Mary was there, still physically breathing, but feeling the life crushed out of herself too**.
1. Friends, I wasn't there two thousand years ago on that hill in Palestine they called Golgotha. But **I've had those moments of feeling my heart crushed inside my chest**. Moments of violation. Moments of terrifying medical diagnoses. Moments of parental helplessness. Moments of confronting the devastating impact of mental illness on a loved one. Moments of absorbing the weight of terror for our trans beloveds when another piece of legislation passes limiting their freedom or the freedom of their parents to seek gender affirming care. Moments of holding so many difficult stories of pain and injury and loss that I have been given the honor of holding with many of you, as well as many others. All of those heart crushing experiences **connect me with Mary Magdalene**, with the grief that she was wrestling with that second night after Jesus had breathed his last in front of her.
 2. And they **connect me with her longing**. Her longing got her out of bed in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Her longing drew her to the tomb. I have felt that longing too; longing, even in the midst of pain and fear and doubt to connect with **something or someone beyond**, some possibility on the other side of the painful present. It's what draws me, even in the midst of seasons of challenge and heartache here to this place, to this Haven, in hope that there is **something more than sorrow to be known**. Perhaps

you understand what I mean. Perhaps you, too, have held sorrow. Perhaps you too, whether full of faith or full of skepticism, find yourself here today drawn in longing for something beyond. For all of us who may resonate with that, **Mary the Tower is here, beckoning us to look upward and follow her beacon.**

3. She invites us to let our longing be the starting place for our spiritual engagement, and from that place, to **persist**. She invites us to **stay present**, even as others shake their heads and walk away - to continue with an open heart until we discover what we're looking for.
4. She invites us to **engage the mysterious**. To be willing to talk to angels, if necessary. She invites us to open our minds and hearts to **what is possible**, to check our presuppositions at the door. I don't think that means leaving behind our brains, but it does encourage us to experiment, to maybe try some things outside of our comfort zone. Perhaps her invitation is similar to something a pastor I knew used to say, **"Faith is spelled R.I.S.K."**
5. Mary invites us into all of that - the longing, the persistence, the engagement with mystery, and **she speaks hope that we too can be encountered by the sacred in the process**. We too can hear the mysterious whisper of our name by a Divine voice who knows us intimately and cares about why we weep. We too can be built up into powerful markers of spiritual transformation that can be signs for others who need help finding the way. We too can be **sent ones invited to speak the truth** of what we've encountered in the mystery to those who also are longing for something beyond.
6. **This is the fruit of genuine spiritual connection**. This is the good news I believe of Easter for all of us. This is the hope we proclaim when we say, "He is risen! He is risen indeed". We are proclaiming the hope that **we are not alone**; that something more is here and that something has the power to bring fresh life to us even after loss. May we receive the beauty and power of that hope, just as Mary the Tower received it before us. Amen.

Questions For Reflection and Conversation

1. How does perceiving Mary Magdalene as "Mary, the tower" impact your understanding of her?
2. How does it impact your understanding of this Easter story?
3. How do longing, persistence and engaging with mystery show up in your own spiritual journey?