

Easter Day

April 5, 2026

The Rev. Scott Walters

This Easter Sunday, I'm not going to bury the most shocking proposition at the end of this sermon, long after those likely to be offended will have nodded off. We're just going to go there. I think it's time we started deemphasizing the fact that Jesus was a carpenter.

I know. It's a lot to take in. I'll give you a minute.

For those who don't know, the shock of that statement isn't actually about Jesus's day job. It's about one I used to have. I was a carpenter for about a decade before seminary, so part of my schtick for more than 20 years now has been, "I used to do the Lord's work. Now I just work in a church." See. It's a pretty good line. Four or five of you found it mildly amusing. More than I can say for most of my jokes.

Mary Magdalene is the one who has convinced me we need to stop treating Jesus like a carpenter.

Here's what I mean. Say you finally find a carpenter who does good work for a reasonable price and, miraculously, one who actually shows up to do that good work when he says he will. If your carpenter moves to Phoenix, you'll be bummed, not heartbroken. It will be inconvenient to have to find someone else to make your household repairs. It will not open up a hole in your heart you know will never quite be filled.

Mary didn't arrive at the tomb on the first Easter morning having lost someone who was good at solving her problems and making repairs to her life. She was a devastated soul who'd lost an irreplaceable someone whom she loved. And I think this pretty obvious detail matters. Because it's not how some of us were taught to come to Jesus, is it? Did any of you get the message that you should love Jesus so he will fix your life? "What's in it for me?" is the standard approach to just about everything else in our world. Mary Magdalene will show us how to choose the better part.

I love John's version of that resurrection morning. There's so much running. Did you notice that? Mary sees that the stone has been rolled

aside and she runs. She runs for Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved and says, breathlessly, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” So Peter and the other disciple run back to the tomb. It’s a footrace that Peter loses. The other disciple bends down and looks in, but doesn’t enter. Peter arrives and charges past him right into the open grave.

Sounds like all-or-nothing Peter, doesn’t it? Remember when we saw him last? He drew a sword in the garden and a servant lost an ear. Jesus tells him to put his weapon away. Violence is not the plan. Soldiers arrest Jesus. And immediately Peter begins denying he’d ever known him. The third time he does that, a cock begins crowing at the Good Friday dawn. That’s where we last saw Peter.

Peter’s fickleness makes him the antithesis to Mary’s faithful steadiness. Mary, who stood at the foot of the cross with Jesus’s mother and another Mary. All of the men, with the possible exception of that unnamed disciple, had run away, you see.

I bring up these details to remind us that this is a love story at its heart. A story about Mary, who doesn’t care who knows she loves Jesus. A story about the women who stayed with Jesus to the end, because their love for him was who they were.

Such is the love that stood weeping outside the empty tomb. When Mary looks inside, she sees two angels framing the place where Jesus’s body had been. What’s astonishing is that Mary is unfazed by the presence of these heavenly beings. All she wants to know is what has happened to the body of her friend.

Is there any love more useless ... any love less practical than a love that wants to care for a corpse, even when two angels have just struck up a conversation? Or answer me this. Do you think there was anything in Mary that believed she needed to love Jesus so he could solve this problem she had with God about her sins?

It’s offensive to even say such a thing. To Mary, Jesus wasn’t just a messianic carpenter who had come down to make a few moral repairs. She loved him. And love isn’t love if it’s something you do so you can get something better in return.

I'm not saying that the death and resurrection of Jesus didn't change anything. His resurrection changed everything. What I am saying is that if you're coming to Jesus to get something from him, even to get your sins forgiven, I'm not sure that's love. Because he's the one who showed us that's not how love works. Love counts no costs.

It's true that the word *love* is a little worse for wear. We use the same word for how you feel about fish pudding, your favorite sneakers, the color green, and that person you'd follow anywhere, even to the cross. A deeper problem is that we Christians have done damage to the word *love* by making it into something instrumental. Something you can deploy, at will, to solve a problem. Like calling a carpenter to fix a sticky front door. "Love God," we say, "because then, and only then, God will save you." But that's never been how love works. If someone says to you, "Love me, or else I will punish you," run from that imposter love like Mary from the tomb, my friend. Run.

Michael Sacasas recently noticed something he'd always overlooked in the story of the Fall. After God plants the first garden, we read, "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food..." The ordering here is instructive. The trees are beautiful before they are useful. "In God's gracious economy," Sacasas says, "beauty leads the way. Before we learn to make good use of a thing, we must behold and delight in it. Perhaps it is only by first delighting in a thing that we can then discern how to put it... to a use that can truly be called *good*."

The description is repeated when Eve looks at the Tree of Knowledge a chapter later, but the order has reversed. She sees "...that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes." Here's what suddenly occurred to Michael Sacasas. "Throughout this account, Adam and Eve lose their confidence in the goodness of God, and they begin to think that the only way of being in the world is by seizing rather than receiving. The knowledge they came to desire was not a knowledge rooted in delight, but a knowledge rooted in the will to power. The instrumental value of things took precedence over the gratuity of beauty, and a new way of being in the world emerged."

We've been living in that diminished world ever since, haven't we? A world in which delight might be a pleasant feeling you have on a sunny Easter Sunday, but the will to power, that's what runs the world.

You might be thinking, "Oh please, preacher. Bombs are dropping on Iranian schoolchildren and the planet is warming and you want me to give delight a promotion? You're telling me love isn't love if it's just one more way to solve your problems? Well, we've got problems. What we need is to will more power into the hands of the good guys."

Maybe you're right. Maybe the world needs a cosmic carpenter, not a loving savior, to set it straight. But remember that Jesus did not live in a less violent, more innocent time. He lived in a time when the empire would nail a threat to its rule onto a post in plain view to make sure everyone knew who held all the power that mattered.

Maybe you're right that we've got to fight violence with violence. Just don't twist the story of Jesus to fit that script. Because Jesus never said, "Believe a few essential things about my resurrection and then you'll be on the winning side of the cosmic battle." He never said that. He never said anything like that at all.

What he did say was, "Follow me. And I will show you what love looks like. Follow me. It will cost you everything, but I will show you just how far true love will go."

And if you want to see what it looks like to say yes to Jesus's call, the twelve men at the Last Supper will not be terribly helpful guides. Look to Mary Magdalene who said, "I'm here for it Jesus. I'd follow you to into a tomb. I'll keep following you, keep searching for you even when you're a corpse some heartless vandals have taken away." That's what love looks like. Mary is the one in the story whose soul all the armies of all the emperors in the world could make no claim upon at all. She is living by the power of the resurrection already, because death makes no claim on her love at all.

You see, grief is the flipside of delight. Sorrow is what love looks like when the beloved is lost or in pain. We know this is true because we know exactly how Mary's broken heart could fill with joy the instant she saw that the gardener she was talking to was actually her beloved. Her teacher. Her

friend. He was alive! Mary's weeping turned to resurrection joy because both were made entirely of the very same love. The risen Christ was drawing her to himself still, as he promised he would draw all people, as if we are all Christ's beloved ones, wooed from all eternity by God.

I don't know about you, but the violent ways of this world aren't working for me. You don't even need to draw a sword. You can become my enemy for nothing more than holding a wrong thought in your head, while this Jesus was caught in the act of loving his executioners just last Friday, refusing Caesar's deadly terms of engagement to the end. I'm tired of thinking I know how to fix things by force or my will to power, or that anybody does for that matter. It's just not working. Might it be time to start following Jesus, like Mary did, no matter where he goes. To stay close to him, not because he hands out prizes to those who do, but because of course you'd follow the one who loves you anywhere. To the grave and beyond.

And maybe, when our love loses the last of its interest in anything it might get in return, we'll find ourselves alive at last that eternal kingdom Jesus kept telling us has been right here among us all along.

Happy Easter, friends! Christ is risen! Run to him like the beloved one you truly are!