

GENERAL PROGRAM EASTER

DISCIPLES WOMEN



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In the Garden

Purpose

In this Easter session, we will consider the garden encounter of Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ as written in John 20: 11 – 18. In doing this, we will consider how we have also been named by the risen Christ. Further, we will consider how we find ourselves in this naming. Finally, we will also consider how, like Mary Magdalene, we have been sent into the world to share the good news.

Suggestions for the Leader

- One month prior to your group meeting read all four gospel accounts of the resurrection story several times. Note the similarities and differences in each. Which of these accounts draw you in the most? Which of these accounts seem most comforting to you? Which of these accounts raises the most questions for you?
- Three week spend some time each day reading John 20:1 – 18.
 - o On the first day, focus on identifying the plot and setting of the evangelist's account. When does it take place? Where does it take place? Who is present and who is not? Spend some time imagining the physical setting of the evangelist's account of Jesus' appearance to Mary in verses 11 - 18. How does it look? How does it smell? What would be the physical sensations of being there? At this point, you might want to read the gospel account in several different versions of the Bible. Do you have a favorite version?
 - o On the second day, read the passage (11 – 18) slowly. Jot down the words the words that seem to jump out to you as you read. Is there anything that seems new to you in this reading?

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- o On the third day, read the passage twice. Once again jot down the words that seem to jot out to you. Are they the same or different than during your first reading? During the second reading, note your feelings as you are reading the passage.
 - o On the fourth day, read the passage twice. For the third time jot down the words that jump out to you. How are they the same or different as before. During the second reading, ask what you believe that you are called to do because of this passage?
 - o On the fifth day, read the passage. Consider how you have heard God in your study? Consider how this passage speaks to your group.
- Two weeks before your group meeting send reminders to all group members. In this reminder ask them to read John 20. Pray for each person in your group.
 - One week before your group meeting, read the background information that is provided for the scripture lesson. Familiarize yourself with the lesson material. Gather materials that you will need for worship center. Make any copies that are needed. Decide if you will be singing the hymn or if you will be playing a recorded version. Several versions are available on iTunes, as well as versions by various artists on CD. If you have the ability you can also prerecord your organist or pianist playing the song and have group members sing with the accompaniment. Plan what you will be serving as refreshments. A garden party theme would be a great idea!
 - On the day of your group meeting, prepare a comfortable meeting space. In the center of the space arrange a worship center that

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includes garden elements including live plants if possible and a Christ candle. You may want to include a large rock to symbolize the empty tomb and a small fountain if you have one.

- Greet each woman as she arrives.

Introduction

Serving as a pastor, I have found that when it comes time to pick music for a funeral service many families, churched or currently unchurched will choose, *In the Garden*. Indeed, I have had more than one family member say, “Oh I don’t know the name of it but I think that garden song would be good.” I also have had the experience of singing this song once a month for about five years as I led a worship service for seniors who were homebound in an assisted living facility. In light of these experiences, I guess I am not surprised when congregants lose track that this is an Easter song. Looking to the origins of the hymn, one finds that it was written by Austin Miles at the request of music publisher Dr. Adam Geibel who wanted a song that would be “sympathetic in tone, breathing tenderness in every line; one that would bring hope to the hopeless, rest to the weary and downy pillows to dying beds.” To fulfill the request, Miles turned to the gospel of John and Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ.

Like Austin Miles, I believe that when we look at Dr. Geibel’s charge we are taken to the very heart of Easter morning. For indeed, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we find hope that cuts through any circumstance in life, we find respite in the awareness that God is constantly working to bring wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, and we find hope in God’s power to bring life out of death. In what the powers of the world thought was the end, we find the beginning of the transformation of the cosmos. Like Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus in the garden, through our encounters with the risen Christ we are named and empowered for mission. Just as Jesus comes as the

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Light of the World in his birth, at his resurrection the darkness of the day gives way to the light of the promise and hope of the Risen Savior.

Lesson

Background information on John 20

In the early church, the Easter cycle was celebrated as a festival time for several hundred years before the Christmas cycle became a part of the church year. Mark, which is the earliest of the gospel accounts, ends with the empty tomb and First Corinthians summarizes the early church's preaching on the resurrection by stating, "He was raised" and "he appeared" (1 Corinthians 15: 4 – 5). Written late in the first century, the evangelist of John gives a much fuller account extending over chapters 20 and 21. Three post-resurrection stories are told in chapter 20. The first is the Sunday morning garden appearance to Mary Magdalene. The second is the appearance to the disciples when Thomas was not present. The third is Jesus' appearance after one week to the disciples and Thomas. In this lesson we will focus on the first of these stories in verses 1 – 18.

Structure of John 20: 1 – 18

Vs. 1 – 2 Introduction

Vs. 3 – 10 The empty tomb

Vs. 11 – 18 Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene

John's gospel begins as the Synoptic Gospel "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark" (in the Jewish tradition of the first century a day was measured from sundown to sundown). In the darkness, Mary Magdalene, who is identified in the gospel of Luke as the woman from whom Jesus exorcised seven demons, comes alone to the tomb. It is important to note that no where in the gospels is Mary identified as a

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prostitute. Indeed, this image of her developed in the patristic and medieval years of the church. Indeed, this passage suggests that she might be considered an apostle, one sent on a mission by Jesus.

In the second movement of the chapter, we see the response to Mary's telling Peter and the others that Jesus' body has been stolen. Various accounts have been given regarding John's outrunning Peter and then waiting before entering the tomb. Gail O'Day suggests that much of the theorizing distracts from what is truly important in this section – the empty tomb. In John's writing, the discovery of the empty tomb is not immediate. Instead it is discerned in the progression of Mary seeing that the tomb has been removed, John, the beloved, noticing the linen cloths, and Peter seeing the linen cloths and the head wrappings. In this progression, Mary's confusion and misunderstanding that Jesus' body has been stolen is resolved with the evidence of the remaining burial clothing. Again, O'Day stresses that verses 3 to 10 center on the empty tomb and is not a resurrection appearance. Here, the focus is on the empty tomb and the truth revealed that Jesus has conquered death. John's faith is not based on seeing the risen Jesus it is predicated on his belief that the empty tomb bears witness to Jesus' conquering death. It is not until the disciples encounter Jesus that they will be given instructions into how to live out this faith.

Finally, in the third movement of the chapter we have a resurrection appearance. It is only in John that Mary weeps. O'Day suggests that her repeated weeping resonates with Jesus' statement in John 16: 20, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice" and sets the stage for Jesus' prediction that pain will be replaced with rejoicing (John 16:22). John also is the only gospel that reports angels sitting where Jesus' body had once been lying. O'Day suggests that the presence of the angels is evidence of the in-breaking of the promised age. Jesus' resurrection ushers in

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a whole new day when God's will shall be accomplished and all of creation shall be restored.

Suggested Structure for Lesson

- Have a variety of art and craft materials available so each person can make a name tag. As each woman arrives ask her to make a name tag that represents their encounters with Jesus. Have them wear their name tags through the meeting.
- Summarize the background of the hymn *in the Garden* that is presented in the introduction.
- Play or sing *In the Garden*. – After the you have sung or listened to the hymn focus the groups' attention on the words by reading each verse with time for discussion following the reading the verse. It is important that each verse is read slowly and distinctively. Ask group members what thoughts or feelings that they have as they hear each verse of the song. Ask them to identify moments in their own life in which they have identified with the sentiments that are being expressed in each verse. Allow time for group members to reflect on the words before answering.
- Have the group read John 20: 1 – 18. Summarize the background information that is presented at the beginning of the lesson.
- Reread verses 11 – 18. Ask group members to identify the words that seem to stand out to them in the reading. Do not prompt or probe for interpretation of why they are drawn to these words. Merely have them identify them.
- Reread verses 11- 18. Ask members to describe their feelings as they hear these words.

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- Ask group members to remember their earliest encounter with Jesus. What were the circumstances surrounding that encounter. What difference did it make in their life?
- Draw attention to the fact that Jesus speaks Mary's name and that Jesus calls each of us by name. Explain that this may take different forms and does not necessarily mean that they have had to have had an audible experience of hearing Jesus. Ask them how Mary responded to Jesus calling her name? Ask group members to remember a time when they have felt as if Jesus was calling their name? How did they feel when this occurred?
- Verse 16 reveals the power of relationship in the life of the believer. Mary hears Jesus speak her name and her life is transformed. Verse 17 opens up the possibility of this intimate relationship beyond Mary. What is Mary's response? What can we learn from that response in terms of our own encounters with Jesus. How do we respond to Jesus' appearances in our lives? How do we go to the others sharing the message of God's love with others?
- Reread verses 11 - 18. Ask the group to identify what actions they believe God is calling them because they have heard this scripture.
- Conclude the lesson by replaying the hymn and asking individuals to prayerfully reflect upon the hymn.

Worship

If you have not already done so, light the Christ candle.

Call to Worship

Leader: God of gardens and promises. We have heard you call.

People: *We come in joy. anticipating meeting you.*

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Leader: God of empty tombs and hope. We have seen your face.

People: *You have taken away our tears, you have filled our hearts with joy.*

Leader: God of Resurrection. We have been filled with your Spirit.

People: *Make us ready to share the good news that we have been given.*

Prayer: *Amazing God, you are steadfast in faithfulness and constant in your love. We come to you this day longing to be transformed by your Spirit. Give us ears to hear your call and hearts to respond with eagerness and with thanksgiving for the blessing of your presence in our lives. Grant that we may reflect the glory and the promise of resurrected life in all we do and all we say. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.*

We Hear God's Word

Meditation

Instructions: Tell the group that you are going to lead them through a meditation on the scripture. Invite them to participate as fully as they feel comfortable. Invite the group to sit with their feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and their hands placed in their laps.

It is important that the meditation is read slowly and that participants have sufficient time of silence as you lead them through this reading.

Read the following, pausing at the ellipses.

Now that you are seated comfortably, relax the tension from your arms and shoulders and breathe in deeply. When you inhale, try to fully extend your lungs by expanding the stomach while you breath; when you exhale contract your stomach muscles to make all the air leave your lungs. Inhale and exhale through your nose. We will sit in silence for a little while breathing in and out....

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As you are comfortable close your eyes and continue to breath in and out....With each breath image that the Spirit of God is as close as the air that you breath. God's presence is surrounding you and greeting you in this time and in this place. Breathing in I feed my spirit; breathing out I cleanse my soul....

Now in your mind's eye, imagine that you are in a garden.... See the garden with plants, trees and flowers that are beautiful.... Enjoy the beauty of these plants with all the colors see the lush grasses in rich shades of green.... Perhaps there is a pond or a stream.... Breathe in and smell the scents of the flowers and the plants that are in your garden. Breathe out and enjoy the quiet and the peace of this place....

Feel the coolness of the breeze upon you skin and the warmth of the sun.... Hear the sounds of the gardens Birds.... The pond.... The rustling of the leaves in the breeze...allow yourself to experience the beauty of this place with all of our senses.... Pause and consider what you are feeling at this moment....

Continue to allow yourself to enjoy the garden with all of its sensations and beauty.... In your mind's ear you hear the sound of someone walking toward you.... It is a comforting and pleasant experience as you turn and see a man walking across the grass toward you.... As the man draws near he speaks your name.... In that moment you recognize Jesus.... You are drawn into his arms.... You feel the joy of knowing that Jesus is with you.... You feel the hope of his presence.... In this moment share with Jesus as you would like.... Know that you can tell him anything that you would like.... Listen to what Jesus has to say to you....

Continue to share knowing that this conversation with Jesus will soon end.... As Jesus bids you farewell, know that he is never far.... Know that he is watching over you.... Watch as Jesus moves out to greet others.... Continue to breath in and out. Allow the garden scene to fade from your mind's eye and turn your focus to your breathing. Feel the breath coming into your body

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and leaving your body.... Feel your spirit being fed and your soul being cleansed.....When you are ready open your eyes.

We Respond to God's Word

Invite group members to share what they experienced during the meditation. Do not force anyone to share. After all have shared as they desire, ask what was it like to hear Jesus call their names.

Have each member of the group share about her name tag. Place all the tags in a basket. When all the name tags are gathered, pass the basket again instructing the women to take a name tag, not their own, from the basket as it is passed. When all the women have a name tag, tell them that they are to pray for the person whose name is on the tag until your next group meeting. Challenge them to find a way to share the good news of Jesus Christ with this person during that time. (You may broaden this challenge by including the names of your congregation's homebound.)

Offering:

At this time you may want to receive an offering for your group's activities or a special mission project.

Prayer

We thank you, O God, that you meet us in all times and circumstances in life. We have heard you speak our name and we are blessed to be called your disciple. Grant that we may be faithful to our calling as we share the good news of your life, death, and resurrection in our words and deeds. May this offering that we have received be used to share your good news. Amen.

Benediction

Unison Prayer

God be merciful and bless us and cause your face to shine upon us that your way may be made known on earth, your saving health among all nations.

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Possible Service Ideas

- If you have space available consider planting a community garden and inviting those in your neighborhood to work in the garden and share in the produce.
- Schedule time to visit those who are homebound or in care facilities. Take a plant or some flowers to help brighten their space.
- Consider making an offering through Heifer Project (www.heifer.org) or Blankets + Program (formerly called Tools of Hope) (www.churchworldservice.org) to assist a family or community in need. Check websites for how-to information.

If you enjoyed the meditation, visit www.wellfedspirit.org for more ideas.

