

Easter Sunday 5th April 2026 - Jesus The Gardener & Baptism Testimonies

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[0 : 00] Just a few thoughts from me on this resurrection day as we think about that event that happened! which changed the world some 2,000 years ago. Indeed, we're going to begin by watching a little! bit of the story in the way that the Gospel of John in the Bible describes. And in particular, what happened when one of Jesus's closest friends, a woman called Mary Magdalene, went to the tomb early on that first Easter Sunday morning. So this is a reading from John's Gospel. Be on the screens for us.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus's body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him.

At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabbuni, which means teacher.

Rabbuni. Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

[2 : 02] Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news.

I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her. So, as Mary Magdalene discovers that the tomb is empty, Jesus comes and stands by her.

However, as we saw, as we're told, she doesn't recognize him at first, presumably because he's the last person she was expecting to see. But also because she's no doubt in shock that the tomb is empty.

And so her head's probably all over the place, and her eyes, most certainly, are filled with tears. Jesus, this apparent stranger, he asks her, Woman, why are you crying?

Who is it that you're looking for? And then John, who writes this gospel, he gives us a pretty intriguing little piece of information.

[3 : 20] He tells us this. He says, thinking that he was the gardener. She asked where the body had been taken. Thinking he was the gardener.

And I guess it's a kind of logical mistake to make, because John's gospel tells us, just a few verses earlier, that at the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden.

And in the garden, a new tomb, and they laid Jesus there. So there's a garden. And understandably, perhaps, Mary seems to assume that the bloke she can see through her tears would be that garden's gardener.

Now, did Jesus look like a gardener? What does a gardener look like? I'm not quite sure. But one theory that's emerged over the years is that because John tells us that the strips of linen in which Jesus' body was buried were left in the tomb, there's a theory that Jesus would therefore have been naked.

And so one theory goes, perhaps he found and got dressed up in some of the real gardener's clothes that might have been lying around. All a bit unlikely and far-fetched, I imagine.

[4 : 35] But over the years, that hasn't stopped artists, particularly in medieval and Renaissance times, from painting Jesus in proper gardener's clothes.

Here he is in that brown kind of smock in the middle there. This is an anonymous painting, but I don't know if you can see that. It also looks to me like Jesus is having a smoke as well there. The mind boggles on that one 2,000 years ago or so. That's one depiction. Perhaps more famously, you've got one by Rembrandt here, giving Jesus a nice floppy gardener's hat, kind of modelling the Monty Don look early on Easter morning.

But if you can see here in Jesus' right hand, he's also given Jesus a spade. And this is a common theme in these kind of pictures, with various artists doing the same.

Here he is leaning up against his spade. Or they often give Jesus perhaps a longer spade or a hoe, as they tell this part of the resurrection story.

[5 : 35] And on one level, with these kind of paintings and stained glass here and so on, we might be thinking, oh come on, it's not exactly subtle, is it?

You know, Mary thought Jesus was the gardener, so let's have him hold a spade to illustrate that point. But of course, Mary was mistaken.

Jesus wasn't the gardener. He was her risen Lord. And yet while she was wrong on one level, it seems to me that her intuition was right at a much deeper level.

You see, I don't think it's an accident that John chooses to give these details concerning gardens and the resurrection of Jesus. You know, the fact that Jesus' tomb was in a garden, the fact that Jesus rose again in a garden, and the fact that Mary thought he was the gardener.

Why would John make these continuous little references to a garden and a gardener? Well, I suspect it's because John wants us to tie Jesus' resurrection together with perhaps the most famous garden of all in the Bible, one we know as the Garden of Eden.

[6 : 54] If you know, as you may recall, in the poetic picture in the book of Genesis, it paints a picture of the creation of the world, and it's in this garden, the Garden of Eden, planted by God, in which we're told human life begins.

Adam and Eve created and placed there by God in order to care and to cultivate the land. And interestingly, Genesis tells us that God himself was in the habit of walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

In other words, in the evening as the sun was going down. Now, as the Genesis story develops, we know that Adam and Eve are described as choosing to follow not God's ways, but their own ways. Genesis kind of highlights that choice of thinking Adam and Eve sort of representing us in many ways, that we know better often than God.

And Adam and Eve are this illustration of how sin enters our lives. And so it's in the Garden of Eden that things began to go wrong for the world.

[8 : 08] That's part of the Genesis story, but it's a story which the writer of John seems to have very much in mind in writing his own gospel.

For example, while Genesis starts, perhaps famously, with these words, in the beginning, so John's gospel starts with exactly the same words, in the beginning.

There's a parallel there. You know, the scene is therefore set, and it seems John wants us to see the story of Jesus as being a kind of companion piece to the story of creation.

Now, we can trace connections between Genesis and the Garden of Eden and Jesus all the way through John's gospel, but it especially comes to light in the way John tells us the story of Jesus' resurrection.

So, for example, whereas it was in the Garden of Eden that things started to go wrong, John tells us that Jesus was buried in a garden, but that was the beginning of the way in which everything would be put right.

[9 : 21] Whereas in the Genesis story, the creation of the world began on the first day of the week, here we're told that Jesus is resurrected, you know, effectively new life begins on the first day of a new week.

You know, we've had the Sabbath yesterday, that day of rest on Saturday, the seventh day of the week, and now Easter Sunday marks the beginning of a new week, a kind of re-creation, with Jesus emerging, as we're told, alive from a new tomb.

Tying in with this, just as God was recorded as walking in the Garden of Eden in the evening, so here, John makes a point of recording that Jesus was also walking in this new garden, only this time it's in the morning, you know, a new dawn for a resurrected way of life.

What's more, while Adam is told by God to care and nurture for the Garden of Eden, and yet he messed up? Here, Jesus is kind of the new gardener, the one who will nurture and care for his creation in a way which brings life out of death and order out of chaos.

And equally, just as Adam and Eve, as a pair, we could say we're responsible for turning away from God, so we could see Jesus as the new Adam and in some ways, Mary as the new Eve, you know, beginning afresh, this relationship between God and humans.

[10:57] And it's interesting, for example, that Mary is recorded as turning around to look at Jesus, symbolizing her commitment to him. But that's in contrast to the way Eve and Adam were said to have hidden from God when God was walking through the garden.

And ultimately, perhaps this is most important, whilst the tree of life was in the heart of the Garden of Eden, so now the cross exists within the heart of this new garden, this new creation, this new tree of life, you know, transformed from being a symbol of death, a cross, to instead being a symbol of resurrection instead.

Loads of parallels. And all of which is perhaps quite neat. But what matters most, I'd say, is that this work of resurrection, this work of recreation, it wasn't simply done and dusted on that first Easter morning.

Now instead, this work of bringing new life, new hope, new possibilities, well, that's the ongoing story of how God is alive and well and working in us and in our world.

And it's interesting that time and time again in the Bible, there's this gardening imagery in the way God relates to us. So God is described in various points as being like a sower or a vineyard earner, a pruner, a cultivator, a harvester.

[12:36] And that means if God is seen as the gardener, then we, you and I, are kind of like his garden. You know, the people through which his work and his care and his fruit is displayed.

Indeed, later in the New Testament, this imagery is used to describe the way in which God's resurrected life is a work in ours, describing it as the fruit of God's spirit working in us, nurturing qualities of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

You know, these are the qualities, the harvest, the fruits of what it means to have the spirit of the life-giving, resurrected Jesus flowing through all of our thoughts and our words and our deeds.

And perhaps most mind-blowing of all, perhaps best of all, says in the letter to the Romans, says this, that the spirit of God who raised Jesus from death lives in you.

Spirit of God who raised Jesus from death lives in you. Just think about that. for a moment. That is mind-blowing, I think.

[13:59] It's the same power, the same strength, the same spirit, the same God who is with us and in us now as who raised Jesus from the dead.

As I say, that's a remarkable truth that the same resurrection power is ours to claim in our life, not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of God's new creation as Jesus helps us to live in his new resurrected, life-giving ways.

Now we're going to hear from them in a bit, but that's part of the story as to why Elysia and Claudia and Heidi are getting baptised this morning.

The decision to publicly say, yeah, I trust in God and I want to do life God's way as part of his new creation with God's spirit, God's power, helping me to do that in my life.

And what's more, I think, on this Easter day, as the service goes through, I think I'd encourage us all to consider this morning, perhaps have a willingness to ask God in your own quiet way, where might you need, where might you like God's resurrection power to be at work in your life?

[15:24] Where do you need to see new things happening, new shoots, new fruit, new bloom? What do you need him to nurture? You know, what are we perhaps lacking that we'd like him to grow and cultivate in us?

How might we, or those known to us, need to know this same healing and hope and wholeness that comes with Jesus in our lives, or in our friends' lives, our family's lives?

Good news, I'd say, on this Resurrection Sunday is that we worship and we follow a God who not only came to be God with us, you know, the language that we think about perhaps at Christmas and the way in which Jesus grows up to say, I've come that you might have life in all its fullness day by day, that's all great, but we also believe and worship in a God who now brings us new life, new meaning, new hope as people who follow a resurrected, living God.

So this Easter, I pray that we would trust Jesus to be the gardener of our lives, trust him to care and to cultivate us so that we might each bear good fruit, fruit in the words of Jesus that will last. And talking of fruit, that is good and that will last. that leads us into our baptisms this morning. And if you've been to baptisms here before, you'll know we like to do this, but if not, just to explain, it's always nice to hear from those who are being baptised as to what their story is a little bit about, why today is significant for them in their choice to come to be baptised.

[17 : 20] And so we're going to hear what we sometimes call testimonies or little accounts really of where they're at in their faith and as I say, what today and what God most importantly means to them. And so we're going to hear three brief testimonies from the three who are getting baptised.

Elysia first, then Claudia and then Heidi. So they're going to come up here. So Elysia first. Do you want to come on down? And as she makes her way forward, taking the long route round, I like this. Risk assessing the pool here, not wanting to fall in there, good work. As she makes her way forward, can we encourage her? A round of applause. Hello, hello.

I know, yeah, well done, well done. So everyone, this is Elysia and you've been with us for a few months, haven't you? And it's been good getting to know you. So I won't steal your thunder. You can share with us. Thank you. I've never done this before, so good morning everyone and a very happy Easter Sunday to you all. For those who aren't familiar with my face, my name is Elysia, but you can call me Lissy if you'd like, if it's easier.

[18 : 36] Just a little about me. I'm 24 now. I've always lived locally here in Burnwood and I've never been baptised before. When my mum and I spoke about why this was, we realised life simply became busy, but it was always a hope for the future.

Reflecting now, I feel really grateful to have had the time to reach this point independently and to feel confident in my own personal decision to be baptised. Since I was a little girl, I found my beliefs comforting and always had my faith.

It was over three years ago now, a very special man who I'm very close to started.

I started to become poorly and I knew I was ready to deepen my relationship with God. I didn't rush. I took time and held space and eventually in December last year, I reached out to an old school friend. Some of you may recognise her name.

[19 : 53] Her name is Sophie Lowe. We met up and that evening she encouraged me to step foot through my local church, the one which both my dad and brother were baptised at.

My first service here was on the 4th of January and I have since thanked Sophie for her support and encouragement. With welcomed arms and comforting smiles, I've been greeted by so many friendly faces, made to feel at such ease and now I'm standing here.

I'd just like to say thank you especially to Trish, Mark, Marie, Gemma and of course Matt. Thank you. I'm so happy to be taking this next step in my faith and to be part and supported by the loving and caring community at St John's.

Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Thank you so lovely stuff.

Thank you ever so much Alicia and yeah you see what this day means for her and Alicia this morning she's going to be baptised at the font which is the little bowl we have here so we'll be baptising it.

[21 : 20] It's exactly the same thing, same meaning as for those who will be using the pool as well. It's just a personal preference but we look forward to baptising Alicia in a few moments time as well.

But many thanks indeed for sharing all that and for letting us in on some of your journey as to what's brought you to today and we'll be praying for you and your family a little bit later on.

All right but thank you very much for that. All right also this morning we've got Claudia who's going to be baptised this time in Nepal. So Claudia you want to come on down as you come down this lot are going to go wild for you.

And everyone this is Claudia and she's going to share a little bit about what today means and is all about for you. Hi I'm Claudia I'm nearly 14 and I moved to this church with my mum last July.

All my life I've attended church and my mum got me christened when I was a baby. So growing up I've never felt the absence of God's love. It's always surrounded me in every decision, every conversation and in literally every single second.

[22 : 29] However it wasn't until about a year ago where I actually started to take my faith more seriously and in doing so I've never felt so at peace in myself but also with the people that surround me.

So the reason I wanted to take this next step today is because even though my life has been a mixture of ups and downs there's always been something consistent and that is the fact I'm never alone because God is next to me.

That's why I've made this decision, not for anyone else but for myself so I can continue to prove to myself that I can get through hard times as long as my faith is strong. I want to take this opportunity to grow and blossom into a greater but kinder person and Christian so I can share the love and peace that God has provided me in my life.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Great stuff.

And relax. Well done Claudia. Well done. Great stuff. Claudia didn't mention and she's a person in her own right. Claudia comes with Laura, Laura's daughter, Curate here as well. So it's great to have you as a family with us.

[23 : 36] But it's fantastic to have Claudia here. Thank you for what you shared just then. Great to know the difference that God is making in your life and when we baptize you in a few minutes.

Again we'll be praying for you to know that refreshment, that renewal that comes with knowing God's spirit as you were saying moment by moment, day by day in your life. So we're looking forward to that in a bit.

And then to complete the holy hat trick today we've got Heidi. Heidi. You want to come on down Heidi? Great stuff.

Hello. How are you doing? Nervous. You'll be fine. You're amongst friends and family so it's all right. There you go. Over to you. Hi.

My name is Heidi Wallace and I'm 15 years old. I've been coming to St. John's since I was just four months old. So some of you have known me nearly all my life. This means I'm used to people coming up to me saying how much I've grown or how they remember me from when I was this big.

[24 : 43] I'm really grateful for those who've been alongside me all this time. But I'm also really glad to have got to know new people over the years too. Throughout my life so far there have been lots of good times but also some harder bits.

And yet through it all church has always been there. Every Sunday no matter what mood I'm in there's always someone there to greet me or talk to me and make me feel happy. I love this. So today I want to say a big thank you to all those people who have inspired me to get baptised.

Sometimes you don't even know you're doing it but I really appreciate everyone who's made an effort to chat with me or even just give me a friendly smile. You really don't know how much this can affect my whole day. I really love church.

I always have. And I'm more than ready to take the next step in my faith journey. I know Jesus has always been with me and being a part of St. John's has really shown me the difference that knowing Jesus can make in people's lives.

Now I want to ask him to make that same difference in my life. So today I want to be baptised to show my commitment to Jesus and my church. Thank you. Well done. Well done.

[25 : 43] Thank you. Thank you. Great stuff.

Well done Heidi. Anna. Lovely to hear again just a little bit of your story but also the difference that this place, these people, this church has made in your journey with God and as it is with Alicia and Claudia we're looking forward to baptising you in a bit.

Again asking that you would know how precious and special you are to God and to us. And this is my daughter as well so that's very nice. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.