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## *Happy New Year!!!*

**A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Easter Day**

Happy New Year!

Wait, that's not it.

That's what we were saying the last time some people came to church: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

But this day, I do want to say, "Happy New Year." Many of our ancient civilizations actually began the New Year at the spring time, just after the spring equinox. This is where the origins of Easter come from.

In addition, I believe we use this time, just as some of us have used Lent, to review the year and to plan ahead with new vigor and faith.

Quite simply, this has been a popular year for religion, hasn't it? It used to be that popular culture paid attention to God only at Easter time. Remember those days? Remember when Time magazine and Newsweek magazine had one cover article a year about God and Jesus, and it was always the week before Easter?

And it used to be, when I preached on Easter Day, I could depend on it. I could depend on the fact that some of you had not thought about God stuff since last Easter, or since last Christmas, when you were last at church.

But not this year. Maybe it started with the questions that sincere Christians have asked about sincere Islam in our time. Is the Christian God the same as the Muslim God? I wish many of you had been here this past Thursday night, when the former Episcopal Bishop of Jerusalem preached. Bishop Samir Kafity is from Palestine. He speaks Arabic. He gave us a special blessing last Thursday evening, in Arabic. And do you know what the Arabic word for God is, when a Christian gives the Christian blessing in that language? The Arabic word for God is Allah, in the Christian blessing.

The year has had more than a usual share of controversy. How do faithful Christians interpret God's Word when our world comes to military action? How do faithful Christians interpret God's Word when our friends love someone different from us? It's been, for some of us, a weary year.

But it has certainly been a year for thinking and talking about God. I suppose that almost every American in the past year has had occasion to speak of God or of Jesus in the past year because of two especially provocative phenomena. What are they?

The Da Vinci Code. The Passion of the Christ.

Say what you will about that book, and say what you will about that movie; but they have certainly made explicitly religious

conversation a part of popular culture. I have certainly said what I will, haven't I? Last January, I could have offered a Sunday School Class on the "First Four Centuries of Christianity and How the Bible was Written." Maybe about five people would have shown up. Instead, I offered a class on The Da Vinci Code; five hundred people showed up. Basically, of course, I was presenting the same material.

Christians have been struggling with the depiction of the passion of Christ for two hundred years. In fact, we now have hundreds of passion plays; and we now have almost twenty movies that have made about Jesus. Mel Gibson's latest work adds to the repertoire. It will not be the final word, but it sure provokes the conversation. In this deep conversation of faith, no human being will ever offer the final word. The best that any one of us will do is continue the story in the most faithful way we can.

But the year has also featured a rather new religious character. Actually, she's not new at all, but her memory has sure been recovered. In fact, the Christian Church has been struggling with her memory for years, sometimes getting it right and sometimes getting it wrong. She is the main character in the gospel account for this morning, the Easter gospel.

She is Mary Magdalene. I have asked a lot of people this week who Mary Magdalene was. It's amazing how wrong some of the answers have been. Who was Mary Magdalene? Some say, "Wasn't that Jesus' mother?" No! "Wasn't that the prostitute?" No! "Wasn't that Jesus' wife?" No, certainly not!

Mary Magdalene is the only person, the only person to make an appearance in all four of the gospel empty tomb accounts. She is a common witness to the empty tomb. She is the first person to go and tell the apostles that Jesus has risen. She is the proclaimer of Good News, no matter how confused people are about her, no matter what people have accused her of, no matter, she is the one determined to speak the Good News of Jesus.

Have you ever been falsely accused? Has someone mistaken your background? Have you been forgotten? Have folks claimed you were having an affair? Are there pieces of your past that are missing?

And yet, have you seen the Lord?

Poor Mary was certainly one of Jesus' closest disciples. She knew him well. And yet, when she is sitting outside the empty tomb, weeping, when she looks up and sees a person standing there, she supposes that he is the gardener. "Why are you weeping?" asks the man. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him!" she wails.

Hasn't that been the case with us, too? We thought we knew this Jesus well. We learned all about him when we were five years old. But gradually, that particular knowledge of him faded away like a lost childhood. How are we supposed to know Jesus as an adult? Many of us, too, claim that someone has taken away my Lord!

Mary did not recognize the risen Christ! And we fail to recognize him, too - over and over again, don't we? The risen Christ is around us every day. The gardener! The hungry man walking beside us. The one who needs clothing and water. The one in prison who needs good news preached to him! But how often we are like Mary; we fail to recognize him.

But then, then, Mary does recognize Jesus. How does she recognize him? Suddenly the gardener, the supposed gardener, says one word. He says "Mary." He says her name.

Do you want to recognize Jesus today? You have talked about him all year. You've argued about him with lovers and friends and enemies and strangers. You've read about him, and you've watched movies about him.

Do you want to know him? Do you want to know Jesus? I do. Mary Magdalene did. Mary Magdalene recognized him when he spoke her name.

I believe Jesus is speaking your name right now. Jesus is the one who, when all is said and done, when folks have reviled you and persecuted you, when you have suffered with anxiety, when you have been confused and lonely, Jesus is the one who is standing right with you and who knows your name.

Jesus is the One who knows you better than anyone. Jesus is the One who can speak your name clearly and cleanly, and so reveal every part of you -yes the embarrassing parts as well as the beautiful parts. But Jesus accepts them all. Jesus accepts all those parts and takes them to God.

And when Jesus does that, well it's like being born again. It's like having a new life. It's like celebrating a new year. Happy New Year!

Happy New Life.

This became the real message of Mary Magdalene. Mary is remembered because she recognized Jesus and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

I didn't just read the book. I didn't just see the movie. I didn't just argue about theology.

I have seen the Lord.!

Look around you this day. Every one of us has the capacity to be a Mary Magdalene today. We have the chance to see the risen Lord, to accept his knowledge of our most intimate lives, and to use his grace to proclaim good news.

Will you become an apostle today? Proclaim the good news. Speak bad news, and you keep Jesus in the grave. Speak good news and you are a witness to where Jesus really is. Speak bad news and you are an apostle of death. Speak good news and you are an apostle of the resurrection.

Alleluia ! Christ is Risen!  
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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