



Moderator's Easter Message 2024

Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:17–18)

Hello, I'm the **Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne**, Moderator of The United Church of Canada.

For the past several months, I have been thinking a lot about the nature of life and work in the church. Specifically, I have been thinking about the "bad news" story of churches being in decline, with the United Church leading that trend in Canada. The financial sustainability of the church is in question, the number of volunteers is dwindling—even at the national church level we have committee vacancies that go unfilled. The church feels like it might be in crisis to some; the church definitely feels in crisis to others.

But this is not a new story. If you think back through the ages to this crisis that Mary Magdalene was having in this story, the whole world of the community of Jesus had been thrown into a real crisis that looked like it had no possibility of resolution. Jesus was crucified for the ways he questioned the status quo, the imperial order of the world under the Romans. Through parable and prophecy, healing and prayer, Jesus confronted the way things were and asked the world to consider a different way, a way focused on discerning God's will for humanity. This world trusted that God wanted us to know that we were and are beloved, which was all well and good when Jesus was alive. But then what?

For centuries—for millennia—we have continued to turn to the scriptures to look for guidance in our faith and our lives and the life of the church. The Easter story is not a story of peace and benign hope. It is a story of disruption and grief, disbelief and uncertainty. And in the midst of it all, Jesus still shows up to Mary Magdalene, calls her by name, and says "But I am still here—and you cannot hold on to the me that you think you know. Go and tell the others."

We are well practised in the United Church at daring justice, about using the Jesus story to justify where we believe others need to turn around and repent to bring about God's justice in the world. But what about our claims to deep spirituality and bold discipleship? We don't see or hear or talk about those things much.

The church is filled with God's faithful people, yes—but what does that mean in terms of how we form each other as disciples of the Jesus story? This is the message that I hope for the church: that we will hear Jesus calling us into deeper spirituality and bold discipleship. That in the uncertainty of our so-called decline, that we need to remember that our faith calls us to believe in a God that shows up and acts in the world. To know that even in our deepest grief the risen Christ will show up and call us by name and remind us that this is not the end of our story.

What does it mean to come from a religious tradition of faith that has very rarely *not* been in crisis? And for 2,000 years has continued to choose faith, hope, and love through it all?

This year, for Easter, my prayer for the church is also the prayer of Martin Luther King, Jr.: that we remember that discipleship means coming together in the ways and teachings of Jesus to believe in a way when there is no way—not only in the seeking of daring justice, but also in our formation as disciples of the Christ story.

May it be so. Amen.

