On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. Who were these women? They were Mary Magdelene, Joanna, the wife of Peter, and Mary, the mother of James. And who was James? James was one of the twelve disciples, the younger brother of Jesus. The central character in this story is not Peter, the husband of Joanna. The central character is not Mary Magdelene. Mary Magdelene is one of the central characters in the Easter Story in the Gospel of John. For me the central character is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Joanna and Mary Magdelene found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground.

We can sympathize with these three women, especially with Mary. In less than 24 hours Mary’s life was turned upside down, her heart filled with grief and despair.

We can only guess Mary had spent much of the previous years trying to understand the meaning of her son’s actions and words. Mary watched Jesus from a distance. She saw the crowds surrounding him, gathered on the grass, as he spoke. She heard stories of his miraculous healings.

Mary watched Jesus from a distance, but she knew that something important was going to happen when he paraded into Jerusalem on a colt. The throngs of people laid their coats on the ground before him and shouted ‘Hosanna’. I would guess that Mary was the most sober person in the crowd that day. In my experience, mothers often have an acute sense of the danger of unusual situations for their children.

For years Mary had been putting together the pieces of her life and the place of Jesus in her life. From the night when an angel visited her as a young woman, to the festival week when the twelve year old Jesus stayed in the temple while the rest of the family travelled home, to the time when they attended a wedding of a friend, Jesus had never been far from the center of the picture of her life.

I would guess Mary had been concerned for his safety and well-being for a long time. I would guess she was not completely surprised when he was arrested and brought before Pontius Pilate. This was her greatest fear, that something terrible would happen to her son.

We can only imagine what she felt when she heard the crowds of people shouting for her son to be killed. We can picture her weeping and the deep wound in her heart and soul when Jesus was crucified. When Jesus died his mother was no longer watching from a distance. At the very end, when many of Jesus’ disciples had fled the city with fear, Mary was there beside him.

Mary had spent years carefully putting the pieces of life together. She spent years trying to understand the meaning of his life and the meaning of their lives together.

Then it all came crashing down. Just at the time she was putting the last pieces of the puzzle together, Jesus was arrested and crucified. It was like someone had ripped out the hundreds of pieces containing the image of her son and thrown them into the charcoal fire in the courtyard.

Mary was left weeping. She cried until there were no more tears. Mary lay awake in the dark, never sleeping, just praying that morning would come. Mary looked at the broken pieces of her life, and wondered if anything would ever make sense again.

Life is like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, comprised of a thousand pieces. As we make our way through life we try to put the pieces of the puzzle into place. It takes years of effort.

There is the section of life where you are just trying to survive middle school and high school. There is the part of life where you are trying to find a career or at least a job that will work for you and will pay the bills. There is the part of life where you know you need to create stronger friendships or be part of a stronger community. There is the part of life where you are taking care of children or parents or friends who are sick.

Life is like the most difficult jigsaw puzzle ever created. There are nights and days when we sit down at the table, the pieces of the puzzle of life sitting in a confused jumble. There are years when we hold the pieces in front of our eyes, examining them for clues. We wonder if they will ever fit together.

Sometimes we wonder how it is we came to have this particular set of pieces. Sometimes it seems like the puzzle of life is solved. Sometimes it seems like we are in a time of weeks or years when everything fits together. Sometimes the puzzle of life feels quite solid, like you could pick it up by one corner and carry it around with you. But the puzzle of life is fragile.
No matter our success at putting the pieces together, there comes a time when a major part of the puzzle of life comes undone. For each one of us there comes a time when we find a blank, empty space in the puzzle of life. For each one of us there comes a moment of grief or pain or sorrow when we realize there is a gaping hole in the place where we had found meaning or life or hope.

The missing pieces in the puzzle of life might not be catastrophic; it might be the result of a little argument between relatives that never got resolved. The number of pieces we are missing might be relatively small, like the empty spot that comes from having a job that doesn’t seem to be all that important or interesting. The hole in the puzzle of life might be deep and wide, like the kind that comes with the death of a child, a parent or a partner. The gaping hole in our lives might have opened up the day you lost that really good job or the day of the bad accident. You might trace the loss of all those pieces of your puzzle back to the month when you learned you had a terrible disease or back to the night when you were physically or sexually abused by someone you should have been able to trust.

It happens in different ways, but very few of us make it through life without losing at least a few pieces of our puzzle. So, whether the hole in our lives is large or small, whether we are missing five pieces or five hundred, at some point most of us find ourselves looking at an empty space that is at least a little bit like the hole that opened up in Mary’s life when Jesus was crucified. At some point most of us find ourselves in a place of emptiness, or vulnerability, or despair.

We cannot solve the puzzle on our own. We have intelligence and vision. We can fit new pieces into place but we cannot create new pieces. We cannot, through sheer force of will or years of diligent effort, patch up the holes in the puzzle of life.

Mary understood this quite well. The Sunday morning when she arrived at the tomb with Joanna and Mary Magdelene she was fully aware of her powerlessness. Her son was dead. Her life was in tatters. She was exhausted. It should come as no surprise to us that Mary and her friends bowed their heads to the ground with fear when the angel spoke to them in the garden. Make no mistake, Mary had not slept that Saturday night. Mary had not slept, probably for many nights.

Mary was in a place of complete despair and exhaustion. Mary was in a place like the place many of us have been. At some point many of us arrive at the day when we realize there is an enormous empty space in our lives and we have no way of creating the pieces to make our lives whole again. At some point we arrive at the day when we come to terms with the fact that we are wholly incapable of resurrecting ourselves. We are incapable of making a coherent picture out of the puzzle of life because we are missing too many pieces.

This is where we find ourselves today. It is Easter morning and we are right beside Mary and Joanna and Mary Magdelene and we are in various states of awareness of the empty spaces, the jagged edges in the puzzle of life. For the most part, we are like Mary and Joanna and Mary Magdelene. They have no expectation that anything will happen to mend the jagged, gaping hole in their lives. They have not been praying for a miracle to happen. We have not been praying for miracles either. We have been thinking of ourselves and of that empty space we just can’t seem to fix.

And God has been at work in the world around us. God is constantly creating goodness around us. God is creating goodness in ways we have come to expect and depend on, like the babies who were born in our city this morning and the beauty of the magnolia blossoms on the trees. And God is creating goodness in ways we would never expect.

We often do not see the new pieces God has created and given to us because they look so different from the pieces we have lost. God says to God’s people, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. We are like Mary and Joanna and Mary Magdelene. When they see the empty tomb they are not filled with hope. They are filled with confusion. They do not recognize God is creating a new reality in front of their eyes.

We are sympathetic with Mary and her friends when they are unable to see and understand the meaning of the empty tomb. We should be sympathetic with each other and with ourselves when we are unable to see and understand. Nevertheless, God is creating new pieces to patch the jagged gaping empty spaces in our lives today.

We do not pray for miracles. We do not pray that somehow the puzzle of life will be restored exactly as it was a year ago or ten years ago or fifty years ago. We know that is not possible.

So we pray for vision. We pray our eyes would be opened to God’s new creation in our lives. We give thanks for the work of Christ in bringing the resurrecting power of God’s love to our lives today. We give thanks for the victory of our God, the one who creates pieces of justice, pieces of wholeness, pieces of love in our lives.