

The First Easter Message

Please open your Bible to the book of John and chapter 20, or turn to page _____ in the pew Bible.

It's no secret that I love the Lord of the Rings books and movies. If you're not familiar, I hope you'll indulge me for a moment. The author of the Lord of the Rings books, J.R. Tolkien, wrote an influential essay on Fairy Stories and spoke about how humans in all cultures share this practice of telling great, fantastic stories – often with mythical elements, like dragons and monsters and the great heroes who defeat them.

And we have a name for the moment in the story when disaster strikes, when the enemy attacks or the dragon destroys the town and seems to win. We call it a catastrophe. The word literally could be defined as the pivotal moment of down-turn (kata=down and strophe=turn). It's the moment of tragedy usually near the end of a dramatic story.

Well, Tolkien was a professor of linguistics and literature, and he wanted a word to describe the exact opposite – that moment when good breaks through, when the battle turns and the hero overcomes the enemy, and not just through mere effort but when something providential happens or an outside force breaks in to the story and changes it for good. It's what happens when all hope seems lost but then something that feels like a miracle occurs. For example, Joseph Loconte writes,

In (Tolkien's) Return of the King, Frodo fails in his quest and yet his quest is accomplished not by him but by the most unlikely of creatures: Gollum. Frodo's defeat — our defeat — is overturned by a Power stronger than our weakness."

- Joseph Loconte¹

Tolkien called this event a eucatastrophe. It's a good catastrophe or an event that turns things up instead of down. Tolkien said that a eucatastrophe is that "sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears."

He's talking about moments like in...

¹ Joseph Loconte, *A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and A Great War* cited in <https://haventoday.org/eucatastrophe-god-tolkien-fairy-stories/>

- In *A Christmas Carol* where Ebenezer Scrooge awakens and realizes that it's Christmas morning and He has time to make things right.
- It's in the story of Disney's *Pinocchio* after the wooden puppet sacrifices himself to save Geppetto and is raised to life as a real body by the Blue Fairy
- *You've Got Mail* – when Meg Ryan sees Tom Hanks and realizes that he is her secret pen pal whom she's fallen in love with.

Sometimes these moments bring a tear of relief and joy to our eyes. I remember tearing up watching one of the Tinkerbell movies with my daughter when she was younger – around 3-4 years old (being a dad changed me emotionally). The forest was brought to life again, and I found myself choking up. I also got choked up watching a movie a couple years ago, but I won't tell you what it was. But there was this hero, avenging the earth, fighting the bad guy and then suddenly all these other heroes (who we thought were dead) showed up again to help. It's a beautiful thing.

These are the moments that move us. Coming back to the Bible, I think that one of the more powerful moment to reflect on would have happened early on that first Easter Sunday morning. A couple days before, Jesus was beaten by the Jews and flogged by the Romans. He was publicly ridiculed and mocked. He had been betrayed and abandoned by those He called His friends. And He was led out of the city and nailed to a cross and crucified until He breathed His last. And now, the tomb is silent.

All is quiet. The air is still. But then...there's the eucatastrophe. It's that moment when the heart starts to beat. Jesus breathes in. He opens His eyes. He sits up and removes the burial wrappings. He folds them up and places them nearby. The stone is rolled away, and Jesus – walks out of the tomb He was buried in of His own accord. He has risen from the dead and has been resurrected, never to die again. Jesus has finished the work of atoning for the sins of His people and now, He has defeated death. He's taken everything that the enemy can throw at Him, and He's unphased. Let's pick up the story from there...

Read [John 20:1-18](#)

Intro

One pastor said that Mary Magdalene preaches the shortest Easter sermon ever – “I have seen the Lord.” That's it. This sermon will be a little bit longer...

What I want us to do this morning is look at the story of this *eucatastrophe* from a particular point of view. I want us to try to enter in to the story of Mary Magdalene, who was one of the first, if not the very first, witness to the risen Lord Jesus. And I want us to consider her story and how her story overlaps with our stories. And ultimately, we'll ask, what does the resurrection mean for us today?

Many scholars and readers of the Bible and Christians down through the centuries have noted, rightly, that it is significant that the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were women. This is what ancient historians call an inconvenient detail. If you were making up this story as part of a hoax to begin a new religion, you wouldn't have the critical eye-witnesses be women. The testimony of women wasn't accepted in court at that time. Women were seen as unreliable and unable to be trusted.

But that's not how Jesus sees women. And the authors of Scripture do not shy away from including the historical facts as they occurred, even if they seem inconvenient.

If you read the gospel accounts together, then it appears that a group of women came to the tomb early on that Sunday morning, and the first to arrive was Mary Magdalene. She is the first to speak to Jesus after His resurrection, and she is sent to tell the other apostles that He is alive. And maybe that's in part why people through the centuries have been fascinated by her. Maybe it's why so many false stories have been made up about her. I don't know for sure.

The Mistaken History of Mary Magdalene

So what has been said about Mary Magdalene?

Well, there's a lot of nonsense out there, especially thanks to works of fiction like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or silly movies like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *The Last Temptation of Christ*. There are old stories from the fourth and fifth centuries that tell imaginative tales of this Mary of Magdalene that occasionally pop up in modern culture.

And so you may have heard some of these stories about her, saying that she was secretly married to Jesus. Or that Jesus didn't really die and rise again but ran away to southern France with Mary Magdalene. Frankly, none of that is taught in the Bible and the sources that say things like that are questionable *at best* and they come from hundreds of years after the time of Christ. Even the most jaded, non-believing historical critic doesn't think that they accurately represent Jesus or Mary Magdalene.

Why does Mary have such a history?

Well, it's hard to know for sure. I think part of it comes from a low view of women. It shouldn't surprise us to look at the history of Mary's reputation and see that many people, even in the church look at her and make negative assumptions about her. Celsus, who was a second-century critic of Christianity, mocked the idea of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness, referring to her as a "hysterical female... deluded by sorcery."

She's been misunderstood and lied about for centuries, probably because she's a woman and also because she shows up at the most critical moment in the story of redemption, which is the most critical moment in the history of humanity.

In addition, there is sometimes confusion even among Christians about what we really know about Mary Magdalene. There are six women named Mary in the New Testament, and sometimes people get their stories confused.

Bart Ehrman, who is no friend of Christianity, writes...

*"So by smashing all these different stories together, you have the following identification: Mary Magdalene is also Mary of Bethany, who was a prostitute but had reformed because Jesus cast seven demons out of her. This picture is not at all historical—it has come about simply by combining different stories that mention different Marys and yet other stories that mention other women, none of whom were named Mary, leading to one big conglomerate story about Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute."*²

Even Christians with good intentions sometimes get mixed up about Mary. So what is her story? What do we really know about her?

Well, there are only thirteen references to Mary Magdalene in the whole NT, and only one place outside of the narrative about Jesus's death and resurrection.

It's found in **Luke 8:1-3**

² Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene : The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 189.

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

So these verses tell us that there were some women who followed Jesus, including a woman named Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out. And these female disciples followed Jesus and supported Him financially. And we read that this particular woman named Mary was also called Magdalene, probably because there were so many other women named Mary, this became her nickname.

You know how there are a bunch of Mike's and Cathy's in this church – kind of weird, huh? Several folks share the name of a pastor and his wife? Coincidence? And there are now a few Nathan's here at our church. Nathan Childress, who leads our missions team and goes to the same small group I do, we call him 'Handsome Nathan.' I think I said it once as a joke, but it just made sense to everyone, so that's what we, or at least I, call him now. Well, Mary is known as Magdalene, after the town where she's from.

Magdala was a town on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee. It was a town known for its pickled fish. And in those days before refrigeration, pickled fish would have been a more common way to preserve fish than it is today. It was also known for its artists and had a reputation for being a sort of hotspot for creative types. Today, we might think of hipsters or people who like to be on the cutting edge of fashion and culture. It's like how when you think of people from Rossville – where I'm from – you naturally think of people who are with it and are cool and artsy. You know what I'm saying right?

Well, that's where she's from. And then we get the only detail that the NT writers offer us about her background – she has had seven demons cast out of her and now she is a disciple, a follower, of Jesus.

Rebecca McLaughlin writes...

We don't know this Mary's marital status or whether she had children. We don't know what she looked like or anything about her sexual history. The idea that she was a

*reformed prostitute was introduced centuries after her death. All Luke tells us is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her.*³

What does it mean that she has had these demons cast out of her?

Well, first, we have to come to terms with the idea that there are spiritual realities in our world. The spiritual world is strange to us in our modern eyes. But the Bible doesn't shy away from talking about the spiritual realities that exist all around us.

And Mary has been delivered from seven demons or fallen angels. But don't think of demonic oppression like the demon-possession you see in the movies with heads spinning and that sort of thing. Biblically, demons don't possess, rather they seek to oppress or to influence and manipulate. In Mark five for example, we read of a man who was oppressed by demons who was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.

In the Bible, seven is the number of completeness or wholeness. Here, the fact that Mary was oppressed by seven demons probably indicates that she was overwhelmed by the darkness of spiritual forces in her life. If it was anything like the oppressed man from Mark 5, then Mary would have been in pain – mental agony, emotional distress, social isolation. She suffered tremendously.

She probably had a bad reputation. She's Mary the demoniac. Mary the crazy woman. Probably Mary the immoral woman. She was a woman in pain. And that was her story before she encountered Christ.

How is her story like our story?

The Bible tells us that we are all like Mary Magdalene in some ways. We all have a history. Titus 3 says that this is our story,

Titus 3:3

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another

³ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*.

We all have a past like her before we met Jesus. Maybe, by God's grace, you came to trust in Christ at an early age, and your sins didn't reveal themselves as fully. But the roots were still there in your heart, even if they hadn't fully bloomed yet.

Before we meet Jesus, we were all like Mary, in slavery to sin and death, haunted by the pain that always accompanies sin. But one day, Mary met Jesus. And He delivered her.

He saw her torment and He freed her, casting out her demons, ridding her of the pain and distress and oppression they had brought to her life. After meeting Jesus, she is now a new creation. Her experience is like what Paul describes in **2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

She was once oppressed and in pain. She was misunderstood and her past was filled with baggage. But when Jesus shows up in her life, He brings freedom and deliverance from all of that.

And so she gives up what she knew, and she now follows Jesus. Her life is different now. It's all about Him. She listens to his voice as He teaches. She follows Him from town to town. She helps support Him financially, Luke says. She may have had some wealth in order to do that, but we don't know that for sure.

What we do know is that she is a disciple of Jesus now, having been delivered by Him.

And that can be our story as well. I don't know what kind of past you have, what wrongs you have done or sins you have committed. I don't know what others have done to you or said about you. I don't know what kind of pain you have experienced or are experiencing now. I don't know your full story, but Jesus does.

Some of us may relate to Mary because our own history has been misunderstood. We may relate because we've been oppressed or weighed down by the enemy. We may have sins in our story that have brought us guilt and shame. But when Jesus shows up, our whole story was re-written. We're a new creation now.

Paul said in Titus 3 that we were foolish and disobedient, slaves to various passions and pleasure. But then we get to the next verse, **Titus 3:4-6**

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, **5** he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, **6** whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

That was Mary's story. She was saved, rescued, delivered – not because she deserved it, but because of the mercy of Jesus. And it changed her forever. She became a follower of Jesus.

And she followed Jesus as He went about preaching the good news of repentance and faith in Him. And she followed Him as He was betrayed and arrested. She watched as He was sentenced to death under the Romans at the urging of the crowds. John tells us that she was there standing by the cross when they crucified Jesus. And she saw where He was buried in a tomb. And that's where this story picks up in John 20.

Mary Sees the Empty Tomb

In verses 1, John tells us that Mary Magdalene goes early in the morning to the tomb. She goes while it's still dark, perhaps there's some symbolism here because the light of the world has been killed.

John has used this theme of night and day, of darkness and light in other places like when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because he's afraid of people seeing, and Jesus talks to him about being the light of the world. Well, at this point in John 20, Mary Magdalene is going in the dark, and she's unaware that the dawn is coming...

John 20:1

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

Mary runs and tells the Peter and John that someone has taken the Lord. They run back (John really wants us to know that he beat Peter there), and they see the burial cloths lying in one place, and the face cloth folded up in a different place – someone must have folded it and laid it there. But they didn't yet understand that Jesus must rise from the dead. And so they return home. But Mary doesn't leave.

John 20:11-13

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. **12** And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. **13** They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

The other disciples leave, but Mary doesn't. She stays and weeps. Why was she crying? She is crying because the one who delivered her has been killed. The one who had given her new life is now dead. She is mourning and grieving the loss of Jesus, whom she thinks is now gone. She thinks He's now dead forever.

What would it mean for her if Jesus is dead? It would mean that there is an enemy that is stronger than He is. It would mean that the one who delivered her from her oppression might not be able to keep her safe. A greater enemy may one day destroy her – if Jesus is still dead. But she's once again mistaken.

The angels ask her why she's crying, and she responds by saying that someone has taken away my Lord and she doesn't know where. Even now, she calls Jesus “My Lord.” That's what He is to her. Not only is He her deliverer, He's her King. He's the one who she follows. She calls Jesus ‘my Lord.’ And then she becomes the first person to see her Lord who has risen from the dead.

Mary Sees Jesus

John 20:14-16

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. **15** Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” **16** Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

It is in the midst of her darkness and grief and mourning that Jesus shows up. She thinks He is the gardener. John includes this detail probably because there is an allusion here to the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the first Adam's role to work and keep the Garden. Jesus truly is the Second Adam who has now crushed the head of the serpent and defeated death. He is the better Gardener.

But Mary doesn't recognize Him yet, she is still confused. But then, He calls her by name. In her story, *this* is her eucatastrophe. This is the moment her heart begins to beat faster, where she now recognizes that her Savior lives!

He has called her by name, and once again she experiences the joy of seeing Christ! To quote Tolkien again, everything sad has come untrue. And it'll be greater than it even was before.

I believe deep down that Jesus loves each and everyone in this room. Just like He called Mary's name, He would call your name today and make all that is sad in your life untrue. He knows you personally. He knows your name. He knows your story – and all the hurt and the struggles and the pain. He knows your sin and the guilt and shame you carry. But friends, there is nothing He can't fix. No problem He can't solve. No pain that He can't take away. There is no enemy that He cannot defeat. Not even death can stop Jesus.

If you trust in Jesus, then He can change your life and give you hope that one day, He will raise you from the grave, and you will live with Jesus in a perfect kingdom forevermore. His resurrection means that He is victorious. It's means joy for us down at the foundations of our souls, now and into eternity. Things will never be the same. He is alive! But the story isn't over yet.

Mary Tells Others

Then Jesus gives her this curious instruction. He says in verse 17,

John 20:17

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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.'"

He says, don't cling to me. Apparently, she has embraced Him and won't let go. But Jesus says, "It's time to let go, but there's something even better coming for you."

If we had been reading along in John's gospel through the chapters that lead up to this, we would know that Jesus is talking about sending the Holy Spirit. He will ascend to be with his Father, and then He will send the Spirit to take up residence in the hearts of all those who trust in him. That's good news!

And what's more, notice what he says, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." You know what that means? That means that they're brother and sister. They have the same father. There's a new family in the people of God.

And what's more, Jesus has a job for Mary to do. Now she is charged with spreading this message of joy and freedom and hope – that Jesus is alive and that He will be ascending to the Father.

Everything is different now, even following Jesus. She will no longer be following Him from town to town hearing Him speak about the good news. Now it's her turn. In the centuries that follow, Mary became known as the apostle to the apostles. The word apostle means "sent one" – someone who has been charged with delivering a message. Now she will be the one sent by Jesus to share the good news with the other disciples.

And that's exactly what she does. **John 20:18**

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

That's her testimony. That's the message that she would tell the disciples that day and is in fact what she is testifying to us today. She has seen the risen Jesus; she has seen the Lord. And that's the last we read about her in the pages of Scripture. We're left with her message ringing in our ears, "I have seen the Lord."

People have often been mistaken about Mary Magdalene. They've been wrong about her relationship with Jesus, wrong about her past, wrong about her value and worth as a person.

And in her story, we've seen that Mary herself is repeatedly mistaken. She mistaken about the empty tomb, thinking Jesus was dead when He was alive. She was mistaken about the body. It wasn't stolen, Jesus was there with her. She was even mistaken about following Jesus. It wasn't a return to the old ways, but something new and better. Now, she was to go and tell the others that Jesus is alive.

So can I ask you will you be mistaken about the risen Lord?

If Jesus is still dead, then we are of all men the most to be pitied. But don't be mistaken. He is not dead; He is risen – He is risen indeed!

So as we think about the story of the resurrection through the eyes of Mary Magdalene. We should consider two questions.

First, *What did the resurrection mean for her?*

The resurrection of Jesus mean that Mary Magdalene was truly free from her the enemy's oppression and from the sin and death that threatened her. The resurrection means that He who had delivered her has not abandoned her or been defeated. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed! And it also means that she has a new task – she has seen the Lord and now she is to go and tell others.

And secondly...*What does the resurrection mean for us?*

It will be no surprise to hear that I think that the resurrection means the same thing for us. It means that we can be freed from the enemy's oppression, free from the guilt and shame of sin, and freed from the fear of death. And now we too have been tasked with going and telling others about that Jesus is alive.

Friends, the resurrection of Jesus means that you can be delivered from your sin. It doesn't matter what your background is, doesn't matter how far gone you think you are, doesn't matter how messed up your life is – you can find hope that God can bring life back to you because He's a God that knows his way out of the grave. No situation is too bleak for him. No circumstance is too hard for him. He is the Lord.

The resurrection is the guarantee that Jesus offers salvation to all who would freely receive it. It's a gift, it's not something that you can earn. You can call out to God and tell him that you admit that you are a sinner in need of a Savior and that you believe that Jesus died in your place and rose again and now you want to follow Him. It's that simple. If you've never done that, what a great day this is to get that settled.

Tolkien said, The Resurrection of Jesus is the eucatastrophe of human history. It's the good news that comes right when we need it. Mary had one when Jesus called her name, and He's calling your name today. The resurrection is the eucatastrophe of our story, and that all that is sad will come untrue.

Let's pray...