

"Meeting the Risen Lord"

John 20:11-18

Pastor Dan Erickson

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Of all the different encounters people had with Jesus while He was on earth, one of my favorites is recorded for us in John 20. It is the spring of 33 A.D.; Jesus and His disciples have come to Jerusalem. One reason is to celebrate Passover, but it becomes clear that Jesus also intends to challenge the corrupt faith of the Jewish leaders. As a result, Jesus is arrested by these men and then turned over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Soon Pilate orders that Jesus be executed and, on the day we call Good Friday, Jesus is hung on a Roman cross and crucified between two criminals. After He dies His body is placed inside a tomb, which the Roman soldiers sealed with a large stone. Jesus' body is in that tomb Friday night, all day Saturday and Saturday night.

And then, here we pick up the story from John's gospel, chapter 20: 1,2 **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. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."**

Peter and the other disciple, who is John, then go to the tomb, find it is empty except for the grave cloths and then they go back to the house where they were staying. **John 20:11-15 but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.**

Okay, before we go further, here is a little background on Mary Magdalene. She is one of the six Marys mentioned in the New Testament. Magdalene was not really her last name, but it means that she was from Magdala, a fishing village on the west side of the sea of Galilee. According to Luke 8:2 Jesus had cast out seven demons from her.

She must have been quite a mess before that happened. Out of gratitude she becomes a follower of Jesus and a financial supporter of His ministry. In The Chosen, Mary plays a prominent

role among Jesus' band of followers. That is not really reflected throughout the gospel accounts, but our text today makes that very plausible. She is the one who stays by Jesus' tomb, and the first person to encounter the risen Jesus. In fact, because of that she has been called the first Christian.

One question about Mary that is debated is whether she was a prostitute before she met Jesus. That was the traditional belief in the church for centuries, but most modern scholars don't believe that was the case. Tim Keller, however, thinks a demonized prostitute may have been exactly who Mary was before Jesus saved her. But whatever her past, Mary is now the *only person* standing by Jesus' empty tomb. As she looked inside, **John 20:12, 13 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 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."**

There are a couple of interesting things here. First, Mary is pretty "non-chalant" in her conversation with angelic beings. It is possible they appeared to be ordinary humans, but being "in white" suggests otherwise. When other folks in the Bible encounter angels they usually shrink back in fear or fall down and worship. But not Mary. Apparently, she is so distraught about Jesus' body not being there, that the presence of two angels doesn't even phase her.

Second, why does Mary assume Jesus' body has been stolen, taken by someone? "They have taken away my Lord," probably refers to the Roman guards, or perhaps the Jewish leaders. But it doesn't seem to occur to her that Jesus may have walked out of the tomb on His own. According to the gospel writers there are at least three different times that Jesus told His disciple that He was going to go to Jerusalem, be arrested, be killed and then *rise from the dead*.

Mark 10:33, 34 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the

teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

Mary Magdalene likely heard Jesus speak those words or at least was told about them from other disciples. Jesus’ resurrection, however, doesn’t even seem to be on her radar screen.

John 20:14, 15 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.”

Now, I get that in His resurrected body Jesus may have looked more healthy, more alive, and different than Mary had ever seen Him. But she simply assumes it is the gardener and now, in Mary’s mind, he is the prime suspect for removing Jesus’ body from the tomb. Again, Mary is not merely uncertain whether Jesus’ resurrection has occurred, she doesn’t even consider the possibility. Despite being told by Jesus that He was going to rise from the dead within three days of His crucifixion, she completely misses the fact that the risen Jesus is standing right beside her.

So, is there something for us to learn from this? Yes, I think there is a very important lesson: faith does not come easy *for any of us*. Faith, genuine faith, Biblical faith, saying faith in Jesus is a gift of God, and a result of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. That is taught throughout the New Testament. Jesus said, **John 6:44a No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.** The Apostle Paul says **2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of the age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** He also writes, **1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.**

Sometimes when we have opportunities to share the gospel with family members or friends, we tell people, “It is so simple, so easy. All you need to do

is believe. Just believe Jesus died for you and rose again, and you will be saved.” That’s all true, except for one part. The “so easy” part. For all the reasons the Bible says, faith in Jesus is not possible without the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Tom Nagel helps us understand why. He is an atheist or at least was. He is probably better described as an agnostic. As a philosopher, Nagel embraced scientific naturalism and assumed people who believed in God, religion, and specifically Christianity were just engaged in wishful thinking. He thought Christians were weak people who didn’t have the courage to face the fact we live in a world where there is no one to turn to for help except ourselves.

But then Nagel began to analyze his own beliefs, his own thinking. He realized he did not want to believe in God or Christianity. If God existed or Christianity was true, he thought it would infringe on his freedom. Nagel had never honestly considered the evidence for whether Christianity was true or not. He could not, because he didn’t want to. Deeply ingrained in his psyche was a desire to resist the truth, if the truth threatened his freedom. Realizing that, and admitting that, means Nagel needs to take a fresh look at the evidence, and cannot be nearly as confident in his atheism as he once was.

Folks, deeply ingrained in the psyche of every human being is a desire to be independent from God and to resist the truth. That is a result of the fall, human rebellion against God. Only when the Holy Spirit opens blind eyes are people to see the glory of Jesus in the light of the gospel. Only then can someone truly believe and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

This means if you are Christian, a believer in Jesus, you have nothing to boast or brag about. The reason I am trusting in Jesus while others around me are not, is not because I am smarter or better than they are. It is because of the grace of God. He is the one who opens our eyes to the truth. **Ephesians 2:8,9 for by grace you have been saved through faith. Ad tis is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

It also means that if we have friends, family members or other people in our lives who don’t

know Jesus, are not trusting in Him, one of the most important things we can do is pray for them. Ask the Lord to soften their hard hearts and open their blind eyes.

Oh, don't misunderstand. We still want to share the gospel, the great news of Jesus in the most clear and convincing way possible. We should ask God to help us do that. And we want to demonstrate the truth of Christianity in how we live, showing care and compassion for people around us. We should ask God to help us do that. But we need to pray that all the words of truth we speak and all the deeds of love we do would not fall on deaf ears or be invisible to blind eyes. Be praying that God would enable people around you to see and embrace the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ.

Another lesson we learn from Mary Magdalene is that faith doesn't always come easy for Christians who are facing challenging times in life. Mary was one of Jesus' first followers and loved Him deeply. That is why she is weeping, yet her faith is so weak. Jesus' promise that He will rise from the dead doesn't even register with her.

Likewise, we as Christians, genuine believers in Jesus, sometimes struggle with faith, struggle to believe God's promises, when we are in the midst of grief, pain or other types of adversity. Yes, as Christians we have been made alive and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We are capable of trusting the Lord in even the most terrible circumstances. But, if Mary Magdalene did not recognize Jesus when He was standing right beside her, it is no surprise that Christians today sometimes miss God's promises that should bring us courage and hope during difficult times.

The lesson for us is be patient with fellow Christians who doubt and are discouraged. "Weep with those who weep," Romans 12:15. Give encouragement and support when the Lord provides an opportunity to do so. Faith, trusting God, in tough situation doesn't come easy for any of us.

Okay, back to the text. Jesus is standing next to Mary Magdalene. She doesn't recognize Him because she assumes He is still dead. And she thinks this man has taken the body of Jesus somewhere. But then, **John 20:16 Jesus said to**

her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

It takes one word from Jesus and Mary's faith is restored. She now knows it is Him. She knows Jesus has been raised from the dead, just as He said, and is alive, standing right next to her. The one word Jesus speaks is, "Mary." He doesn't call her "woman," or anything like that. Just "Mary."

That one word assures Mary that not only is Jesus alive, but that He is indeed the worthy object of her faith. The one who has conquered death, is also the one who calls her name, cares about her, loves her. At this point, that is all she needs to know.

Friends, it is very unlikely you will ever hear Jesus call your name with an audible voice, at least on this earth. But I assure you, He knows your name. Even though there are about 2.5 billion professing Christians in the world today, *He knows your name*. The Lord assures us of that in the Bible **Isaiah 43:1 "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.**

Yes, those are words spoken to Israel in the old covenant, but in the new covenant they are true for every believer in Jesus. Jesus as He describes the good shepherd says, **John 10:3b The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.** Yes, He is the good shepherd and adds **John 10:27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.**

Oh, friends, though you may not always realize it, you are never just a number to the Lord. If you are trusting in Jesus Christ He knows, loves, and cares for you as an individual. You might think, "Well with 2.5 billion Christians out there, He certainly doesn't have time to be concerned about me and my problems." But if you think that you are wrong. As far as God is concerned there is no one in the world who is more important than you. And that is true for each person in this room who is trusting in the Lord Jesus. He knows you. He cares about you. He loves you.

Many of you have not heard of Carl Henry, but he was the premier evangelical theologian of the 20th century. He died in 2003. I had the privilege of meeting him a couple of times. My friend, Ken Kohl, attended the same church as Carl did in

Washington, D.C. One day, Ken introduced his fiancé, Karen, to Carl. Wanting to make sure Ken was going to marry a genuine Christian, he asked her, “Karen, what do you think is the gospel, the good news?” She was very nervous, but replied, “Well, that Jesus died on the cross for our sins.” He said, “Almost. The Gospel is that Jesus died on the cross for *my* sins.”

Folks, he was so right. That is such great news. If I was the only sinner on earth, Jesus would have still gone to the cross to pay the penalty for all my sinful actions, words, and attitudes. He would have done the same for you. And really that is what He did. He did not just suffer and die for sin in general, but for every specific sin we have committed. As a song says, “Every bitter thought, every evil deed crowned His blood stained brow.” That is how much the Lord Jesus loves not just us but loves you. He knows you. He knows your name. He cares about you. He loves you. Don’t forget that. Don’t forget this on those days when life seems really hard.

Okay, back to Mary and Jesus. Jesus says, “Mary.” She recognizes Him, and relies “Rabboni” or Teacher, and then apparently embraces Him. After what I assume is just a moment of two, **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.’”**

Now, some speculation that Jesus had not yet received a resurrected body, I don’t think that is the case. I believe Jesus is saying, “Mary, you can let go of me. I am not going anywhere right now. It will be 40 more days before I ascend to the Father. What I need you to do right now is go tell my disciples, the 12, minus Judas, that *I am alive*. Though none of you apparently thought it would happen, I have risen from the dead, just as I said I would.” And this is just about the most important news there has ever been. **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.**

Now, Mary’s reaction when she realizes Jesus is alive and standing right next to her is understandable. Her faith in and love for Jesus is real. Celebrating and just wanting to be with Jesus

is an understandable and really a very healthy response. But Jesus has an assignment for her, a task that needs to be done. She needs to go and let others know what has happened.

This provides another important lesson for us. This is a room full of people who have faith in and love for Jesus. If you are not one of those folks, we are really glad you are here, pleased that you have taken time to be with us this morning. My hope and prayer is that even now, the Lord would open your eyes, and you would see Jesus, see Him as He really is and embrace Him as Savior and Lord.

If you have questions about what this means or what it means for you, I would love to chat. But for all of you who are believers in Jesus, trusting in Him, you have been doing something very important. You have been celebrating who God is and what He has done for us through Jesus. You have expressed gratitude to the Lord for His goodness and grace. You have been worshipping. That is a good thing and important thing for us to do. And it is good to do so every day during our devotional time or really on any occasion. But it is especially important to do when we gather with other believers for corporate worship like we do on Sunday mornings.

But like Mary, it cannot stop there. God calls us to be more than worshippers. He calls us to tell the good news about Jesus to others. He wants us to help them become worshippers as well. Before He ascended to heaven, Jesus met with those disciples who had been told by Mary that Jesus was alive. He spoke to them and gave them what we call the great commission. **Matthew 28:19, 20 go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

Folks, it is great to be part of a church full of people who, like Mary Magdalene, love Jesus. It is even better to be part of a church where people, like Mary, love Jesus and share the great news of who He is and what He has done, with their friends, family members and other people they know. Oh, I know it is not always easy to do that. It can feel awkward.

But if you love Jesus and are confident He is the risen Lord and know this is what He has called you to do, and believe it is something He will help you do, it should be a priority. May the Lord enable us to reflect His light into this dark and broken world, today and in the days ahead.