

Easter: The Death of Despair, John 20:1-18
April 12, 2020

For the first couple centuries, the church did not meet not in big, beautiful buildings like the one we are privileged to gather in during normal circumstances, but in homes like the one you are worshipping in this morning. In fact, in many places around the world house churches still thrive...So be encouraged that the church is not the four walls of a building, but the church is us. The church gathers every Sunday for the last 2000 principally because of John 20:1. The day of the empty tomb, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. And so we celebrate Easter every Sunday, although this is the day we set aside as particularly special.

Now talking about celebration when we are in the midst of a pandemic may seem, on the surface, a bit tone-deaf. How can we celebrate, how can you have joy at a time like this? To the casual observer or skeptic, we may seem aloof and unhinged from reality. I guess it depends on your perspective.

Have you ever found yourself in a heated argument over how a series of events or the origins of how a conflict came about? And while you are arguing about the details and the tone of voice and the order of events and whether or not it is legitimate to be offended, you are astonished because you are thinking in the moment, were we even in the same conversation, or the same room? How can we both have such vastly different interpretations of the same situation? What is wrong with them? I wish I recorded this...If you are married, can I get an amen? And then some time goes by and you take a step back and you actually hear the other person's perspective...you kind of go, "Ohhhh, okay that actually does make sense, that actually changes everything about all those not-so-nice things I thought about you. I see how me saying "I gotta get out of this house" might have sounded like I wanted to get away from you." I mean, hypothetically speaking... Nothing actually changed about the circumstance, but what did change is your perspective. You saw things through a new set of eyes. **Our ability to celebrate comes from seeing our present crisis through a new set of eyes... perspective of Easter.**

This is the lesson we learn through following Mary Magdalene to the tomb that first Easter morning. What Mary needed, and what we need most is to see our circumstances through the perspective of Easter. In John 20- **Who is Mary and how her perspective changed from despair to Joy?**

Who is Mary Magdalene?

Well there is more speculation, myths and urban legends about Mary Magdalene than any other person in Scripture other than Jesus. But here's what we do know, Scripture tells us that Mary was a Jewish woman from the fishing town Magdala, on the **western shore of the Sea of Galilee**. In fact, very recently, archeologists discovered the ancient town of Magdala and the **synagogue** that Jesus would have taught in during his early ministry. Continually verifying that the more they did up from the ground, the more the Bible proves to be historically accurate. This town is likely the very place that Jesus met Mary and through that encounter she had her life completely transformed. **[Slide]** The Gospel writer Luke in chapter 8 records that Jesus

delivered Mary from the oppression of 7 demons. The number 7 was an idiomatic way of saying something was significant, kind of like our word mega. Mary was mega-afflicted, mega oppressed with demonic illness. Overt demonic activity was prominent in this time and location because the forces of evil were battling to thwart the plans of God through the prophesied Messiah, Jesus. But whatever the nature of Mary's condition, imagine the depression, the anger, the desperation, the confusion, the marginalization and shame she must have experienced. It may have been akin to those who suffer with significant mental or emotional illness today. But through this encounter with Jesus she is suddenly, and dramatically delivered from her torment. Put yourself in her shoes...the relief, freedom, new lease on life and gratitude she must have experienced for Jesus. And so she becomes a devoted follower of Jesus and becomes a close friend and eye-witness to the life and ministry of Jesus.

How did Mary's Perspective Change from Despair to Joy?

The deepest despair we can experience comes when the thing that we love the most is taken away from us. Maybe that is a spouse, a parent, a child...When you love and cherish someone to that extent, the despairing feelings can be so deep and dark and real. But the thing we love the most may not be a person, but our career, our reputation. It may be our comfort and safety or our health. But when these things are taken from us we can experience a profoundly disorienting darkness that strips meaning and joy from our lives. That may describe you today.

What Mary Magdalene loved most was Jesus. He was everything to Mary. He radically changed her life, he gave her a reason to wake up in the morning. She left everything to follow him. Jesus defined Mary's existence. And her expectations and hopes for Jesus were like the rest of his followers in 30 A.D., Palestine: That he was going to usher in a political overthrow of the Roman occupation and oppression and fulfill all the promises of the prophets who said that the Messiah would reign on the throne of David and establish peace and prosperity forever.

And then Friday evening came. Jesus is arrested, beaten, mocked and eventually crucified in a horrifically, shameful way, treated like the scum of the earth and a criminal. He dies and dies conclusively. His dead body taken to a tomb with a large stone rolled to seal the entrance. And Mark 15 tells us that Mary was there to see all of it. Imagine all of her hopes and dreams, all of her expectations crushed in that moment. The person she loved more than life itself was gone and she couldn't even say goodbye. We call it Good Friday, but through the eyes of Mary in that moment, this was the worst, darkest day of her life. This is why we see her here in John 20:1 at the tomb early Sunday morning while it was still dark, weeping. The darkness and loneliness of the early morning was matched by the darkness of her despair.

Can you relate to that? Maybe someone you love was taken from you. But maybe something you love wasn't a person, but the career you love, or the reputation you cherish was taken from you. Maybe it was your health or security or comfort that was taken from you. Whether it is deep despair or moments of profound sadness, I think if we get a few years under your belt we will all experience this to varying degrees. Especially in a time like now. I was speaking to a woman this week who said she ventured out for some groceries and was standing in a terribly long line watching everyone walking around with masks avoiding everyone and it was so

disturbing to her. She came home and just couldn't stop weeping for 20 minutes. Whatever sadness, anxiety, fear, despair you find yourself in right now, Mary's can relate.

Well things get worse for poor Mary. She gets to the tomb, probably hoping to be close to Jesus, maybe just to feel like she can say goodbye in her grief, and finds that the stone is rolled away and so she runs back to the other disciples and says... "He has risen, He has risen indeed!" NOPE that's not what she says- v.2 "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him!" All she can see, based on her circumstances, this is a grave robbery. Some sick joke or just one more way to twist the knife.

Timeout- Didn't Jesus said on multiple occasions that he was going to die and after three days he would rise again? Wouldn't they have been expecting this? Why was Mary the only one at the tomb in the morning on that third day? Why was her instinct- grave robber instead of risen Lord? From our vantage point, it is hard to see.

Prominent expert in 1st Century Jewish culture, N.T. Wright- "It cannot be expressed too strongly that 1st century Jews were not expecting people to rise from the dead as isolated individuals.

Resurrection for them was something that might happen to all on that great future occasion when God brought history to an end and a whole new world was renewed. It will not do, therefore, to say that Jesus' disciples were so stunned and shocked by his death,

so unable to come to terms with it that they projected their shattered hopes onto the screen of fantasy, and invented the idea of Jesus' resurrection as a way of coping with their cruelly broken dream.

That has an initial apparent psychological plausibility to 20th century people but it will not work as serious first century history."

I think this is an important aside because many skeptics of the resurrection of Jesus assume that these were ancient, gullible people who were easily duped and prone to believe in someone coming back to life.

There were lots of similar messianic movements in the Jewish world roughly contemporary with Jesus, there were many situations where a messianic leader died a violent death at the hands of authorities. In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been risen from the dead. They knew better. Followers would not have continue following, let alone became so bold to even die for this belief...unless it really happened. So if you are tempted to take Jesus' claims that he would rise from the dead as a metaphor, so did Mary and the disciples... until it actually, bodily, really happened.

Time back in...this is why through the eyes of Mary she is interpreting her circumstances going from bad to worse. And so she is just distraught, weeping, she goes into the tomb.

John 20:12-15

¹² She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?" Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away."

Do you see the irony in the situation? Mary is surrounded by angels and the risen Jesus himself but all she can see are some dudes in robes and a gardener. She is standing in the middle of the greatest moment in history but all she can see is that she's in the middle of a disaster. She feels like God abandoned her, meanwhile he's standing right in front of her and asking, "Who is it that you are seeking?" Despite all of her love and passion for Jesus she is absolutely blind to the One standing in front of her because her vision of Jesus was too small. She sees, but she can't see her circumstances through the eyes of Easter.

How did Mary's perspective change from despair to Joy? One single word uttered by Jesus.

John 20:16

Jesus said to her, "Mary." Turning around, she cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!"—which means "Teacher."

At those words, her blindness becomes sight. Her despair and sorrow became delight and astonishment. John 10:3-4 [The good shepherd], "calls his own sheep by name and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." Mary is finally able to see her circumstances through the eyes of Easter. Through the eyes of the resurrected Jesus. Do you see what this meant? Not only was Jesus, her teacher and friend alive. It means that every single claim that Jesus ever made was true. It means that he really is the Son of God and messiah. That he really does have the power to forgive our sins. That he really did destroy the curse of sin. That He really is the way to the Heaven. That those who believe in Him he will give abundant and eternal life. That he will never leave us or forsake us. Wipe away every tear. The resurrection changes everything. What she thought was a curse became a blessing. What she thought was a terrible Friday, becomes Good Friday. What she saw as defeat was in reality victory. What she saw as God's abandonment was actually God's accomplishment.

If you are watching this today, Jesus is speaking your name through the story of Mary. We may see our circumstances much like Mary. Why is this happening to me? Why would God take from me someone I love? If God is real why is he allowing this pandemic? Why would God abandon me? Like Mary, we see, but we aren't really seeing. When the nails went in and the tomb was sealed they thought their lives were over...but the opposite happened. What if we view our

circumstances through the eyes of Easter? The joy that we can get doesn't just make us forget the bad things, I will turn them inside out and show you how they lead to the joy. Jesus is whispering your name to you just like He did to Mary. He is with you. He has overcome your circumstances. That doesn't mean they aren't real, but it means they aren't the end and there is victory.

2 Corinthians 4:8,14

⁸ We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair. ¹⁴ For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus.

Joni Earickson Tada, had a terrible diving accident when she was 17 that left her as a lifelong quadriplegic. After the accident she sunk into deep despair and considered killing herself, until like Mary, she met the resurrected Jesus in the pages of Scripture. She has had an amazing influence in our world over the past 40 years. I want to read something she wrote reflecting on a recent experience.

"I was at a banquet at a big Christian conference and I was sitting, along with everyone else in this huge banquet room. At the close of the message, the speaker asked us to push our chairs away from our tables and get out of your chair and kneel on the carpeted floor in prayer. Well, I sat there in my wheelchair and I watched as everyone else in the room – there had to be maybe 500 or 600 people—all of them got out of their chairs and they got down on their knees for a brief time of worship. With everyone kneeling in the banquet room, I sat there kind of standing out. I looked around and I was sticking up, way up, the only one sitting there in this huge room. And looking around, I could not stop the tears. (Seeing with our eyes, that might be a reason to cry at her sad circumstances...but not with the eyes of Easter)

Oh, and I was not crying out of self-pity. No, my eyes were wet because it made me think of the day when I, too, will be able to get up out of this wheelchair on new resurrected legs. I can't wait for that day because when I get my glorified body, the first thing I'm going to do with my resurrected legs is to fall down on grateful, glorified knees. I will once again have the chance to say with Psalm 95:6, *'Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.'*"

This is seeing with the eyes of Easter. Can you imagine the hope that our faith gives to something who is disabled? Someone with Chronic depression, anxiety, who lost their job or someone they loved? Friend, you are not going to miss out on anything if you trust Jesus.

Jesus is whispering your name. He wants to give you a new vision for your circumstances, through the eyes of Easter. Will you turn and cling to Him like Mary did? The Bible says that all who trust in Jesus and what he did for you by dying on that cross will be saved.

Invitation: Christianity 101.

