



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

## "Can You See It?"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church  
On Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023, from John 20:1-18*

Hallelujah! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed!

Long before Disney gave us *The Mandalorian*, there was "The Magdalene." I'm not kidding, that's how the gospel writers referred to her, as The Magdalene, because there were so many other women named "Mary" who were disciples of Jesus, including his own mother. Mary was the most common name for women in the first century, so the gospel writers had to distinguish this Mary from all the others with the topographic surname of her hometown Magdala, a thriving fishing village in Galilee, where people were engaged in the extractive economy of making fish paste for King Herod and other ruling class elites. She was not just Mary; she was The Magdalene. Like so many of us, her identity was entwined with the place that she was from, like a Charlottean, a Carolinian, or a Tennessean.

There's a reason so many women in the first century were named Mary which is the Aramaic version of the Hebrew name of Moses' sister, Maryam, who played a critical role in delivering the people of Israel out of slavery and bondage in Egypt. Names were extremely important in Jewish culture. To give a child a name was to give it a purpose, a calling, and a mission in life, names were aspirational—they were hope. The reason so many women were named Mary in the first century is that all the Jewish mothers and fathers in Galilee were hoping their children would grow up to be like Maryam and deliver their people from the new force called the Roman Empire that was brutally oppressing them and crucifying people. It is high symbolism that a cadre of women named Maryam were with Jesus all the way to the bitter end as he was crucified on the Day of Preparation, the evening before Passover, when Jewish people share a meal to remember the story of Moses and Maryam, and their role in great drama of deliverance and salvation from the Empire.

Desperate hopes for deliverance and dreams of salvation were in the air and on the minds of every Jewish person in the city of Jerusalem, but those hopes and dreams were soon dashed as Jesus was betrayed, abandoned, arrested, tried, tortured, and condemned to die. All the hopes and dreams of salvation for every woman named Mary and all the disciples were shattered when their teacher was taken from them, put on a cross between two thieves, and executed like a common criminal. Everyone lost their hopes and dreams of salvation. Everyone walked away as if death had won, and all was lost.



Everyone except The Magdalene. There was something different about her. For some reason, Mary did not betray, abandon, or deny Jesus. She did not walk away. She did not leave him. She stayed. She went back. She lingered. What was it about Mary that made her stay at the cross and the grave, and return to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, and linger even when the men had all gone home? What was it about this woman—this Mary—this disciple—that gave her the determination to do what others could not?

Something compelled Mary to get up early and go to the tomb; something John does not tell us about. We are left to imagine it for ourselves. Why did she go? What was it that drove her to the tomb? Was it grief? Was it hope? Was it stubbornness? Was it love? Yes! The great Pauli Murray wrote, “But love, alas, holds me captive here, consigned to sacrificial flame, to burn and find no heart’s surcease until love’s more enduring uses I may learn.”<sup>i</sup> Love held Mary captive. Love burned like a sacrificial flame inside her, and love is what compelled her to stay at the cross and keep watch at the grave. Love is what got her up early in the morning and set her out to the place where he was buried. Love is what brought Mary to the empty tomb and made her linger there. Love is what brought her face to face with the risen Jesus and love is what enabled her to see the resurrection.

Call it grief if you want to, but grief is just another word for love. Grief is just the love we have for what we’ve lost. The Magdalene loved Jesus so deeply she wouldn’t let go—she couldn’t let go. Don’t reduce her love to a romance like Dan Brown in the *Da Vinci Code*. If eros was present, it was only part of the story. Mary exhibited all the loves the Hebrew and Greek language affords—*ahava*, *hesed*, *eros*, *philo*, *storge*, and *agape*. She loved Jesus all the ways a person can be loved. She didn’t just love Jesus when he was teaching, or healing, or feeding, or lifting the lowly. She didn’t just love Jesus when he was telling parables, or correcting the disciples, or challenging the Pharisees. She didn’t just love Jesus when he was cleansing the Temple or eating with tax collectors, sex workers, and sinners. Mary loved Jesus even after he was betrayed, abandoned, arrested, tried, condemned, tortured, crucified, died, and buried. Her love was faithful and steadfast. She loved Jesus all the way to the cross and beyond. And there is something about that kind of love. It is a love that contains the awesome power of resurrection, liberation, and salvation.

In the last essay James Baldwin published, he wrote “Salvation is real, as mighty, and as impersonal as the rain, and it is yet as private as the rain in one’s face. It is never accomplished; it is to be reaffirmed every day and every hour. There is absolutely no salvation without love.”<sup>ii</sup> There is no salvation without love, no liberation without love, no resurrection without love. And this is why, sadly, some people just can’t see it.



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

When Mary told Peter and the other male disciples that Jesus' body was gone, they ran to see for themselves. They bent down, they looked inside, they even went into the tomb and saw his grave clothes, but they did not see Jesus. They did a lot of looking that day but all they saw were the linens that once donned the broken body of their teacher. Peter and the other disciple did a lot looking, but they saw nothing—no angels, no gardener, no resurrection, no salvation, no liberation—only the remnants of someone who was no longer there. They had betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him. Their love had failed to see Jesus through the cross and now they no longer had the eyes to see his resurrection, so they went home empty handed.

The resurrection is not a fact we prove, a ticket we punch, or a doctrine we hold—it is a form of existence, a way of life we are invited to lead, a proposition that we called live. Resurrection is the invitation to live as if history is not inevitable, the horizon is not closed, the future is open, and there is always the possibility of a new creation. That's why there's no salvation, no liberation, no resurrection without a fearless love for the persecuted, the criminalized, the betrayed, the arrested, the unjustly tried, the condemned, the tortured, the oppressed. There is no salvation, liberation, or resurrection without fearless love for the crucified peoples of our world. Mary loved the crucified so much she wouldn't leave him no matter what happened. But sometimes we struggle to see the resurrection. Many days, our tears of grief over the pain and agony of our world cloud our vision. Other times, like the male disciples we struggle see the resurrection because we fail in our love for the crucified people of our world who are living with their backs against the wall.

People in this church have long lived in solidarity with those whose backs are against the wall. On Easter Sunday 1964, our former Senior Minister, Dr. Carlyle Marney, told this church where he saw the resurrection. He said, "From the time she was six years old the only name we used for the girl who grew up in our church was a pet name, "G." She was now enroute to Atlanta, then Jackson. She shuttles back and forth in the underground student drives to see a racial redemption in our time. We heard later she was jailed in Jackson for the third time, and I remember what her mother had wanted for her. She'd given her everything the magnolias at their best could bring—everything you would want for your own children—but G had spurned it all for slacks and a bus, tired feet, and the disinfected odor of town jails—[in order] to be numbered *with* the transgressors. Somewhere along the road she convinced her father too that she had to be interposing her frail body where the transgressors are."



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Marney concluded by saying, "Resurrection is an earnest investment of all who ever numbered themselves with transgressors for the transgressor's sake. It is for all those 'numberless unknown heroes equal to the greatest heroes known!' This is what resurrection is about. It is not a gratuity or a given immortality. It is rather that God can be counted on to set the record straight [as he did with Jesus]. Those who number themselves with transgressors, those who interpose themselves for the suffering of the world, are not left out of the great. God backs them up."<sup>iii</sup>

These days it seems like everything is dying. They say the Church is dying. They say America is dying. They say democracy is dying. They say the Earth is dying. Are they dying or are they being resurrected? It's a matter of perspective and it depends on where you stand in relationship to love. If you believe in love, then you know that love is the one thing that cannot be killed. Love is the one thing that cannot be destroyed. Love is the one thing that cannot be eliminated. Love is the one thing that cannot die. Love is the one thing that cannot be crucified. They can crucify someone we love but they cannot crucify love. They can bury someone we love but they cannot bury our love. Mary Magdalene found out that even though they arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified her teacher, love was still at large. Love was on the loose. Love was running free. Love was robbing graves. Love was already back at work. Love was wearing a gardener's hat. Love was carrying a trowel and a spade. Love was tilling the soil of a new creation. Because you can't keep love in a jail cell, on a cross, or in a grave. Love cannot be contained! And that is the good news of Easter. Hallelujah!

I saw a resurrection this week in the house chamber of the Capitol building in Tennessee, where two representatives, Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, were expelled because they rose up for children, parents and the people of Tennessee. They were expelled because they rose up for love, they numbered themselves with the transgressors, and counted themselves with the crucified. After he was expelled, Rep. Justin Pearson rose and offered an Easter proclamation. He said, "I tell you it was a sad day on Saturday. All hope seemed to be lost. Democracy seemed to be at its end. It seemed like the forces of death might win. But oh, we've got good news folks! We've got good news that Sunday always comes! The resurrection is a promise and a prophecy! It's a prophecy that came out of the cotton fields. It's a prophecy that came out of the lynching tree. It's a prophecy that still lives in each and every one of us in order to make the world the place it ought to be! So, I still have hope because I know that we are still here, and we will never quit!"



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Love never quits, love never stops, love never ends. You can expel lawmakers, but you can't expel love. Love always comes back. Even when you think it's dead, love comes back from the grave. Paul said, "Nothing can separate us from love. Not life, nor death, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation." He said, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Everything comes to an end but love never ends. Love springs eternal. Love is invincible. Love is immortal. When everything else is gone, the greatest of all things remains—and that is love." Love always wins! Do you believe in love this Easter? Can you see with the eyes of love? Can you turn? Can you hear your name? Can recognize the gardener for who he really is? Can you identify your teacher? Can you begin your own process of rising? Can you witness the good news of a new creation? Can you see the resurrection?

Climate activist Ayisha Siddiqi once wrote "Love is still the only revenge. It grows each time the earth is set on fire. But for what it's worth, I'd do this again. Gamble on humanity one hundred times over. Commit to life unto life, as the trees fall and take us with them. I'd follow love into extinction."<sup>iv</sup> Resurrection is the willingness to gamble on humanity again and again, one hundred times over; to commit to life unto life whatever may come; to follow love into extinction. Where is love calling you this morning? Where is love beckoning you to go? Where is love compelling you today? Where is love inviting you on this Easter morning? Where is love asking you to turn in a new direction? What tombs is love calling you to visit? From what gardens is love speaking your name?

A new creation waits on the other side of your eyelids. Resurrection is longing to be seen and lived by those who fearlessly love the crucified people of our world. The good news of Easter is not simply that a Jewish teacher from Palestine got up from the grave 2000 years ago and a woman named Mary saw him. The good news is that the end is never the end, history is not inevitable, the horizon is never closed, the future is always open, and there is always the possibility of resurrection and new creation because love cannot be crucified, love cannot be killed, love cannot be expelled, love cannot be contained, love always comes back because love never dies, love never quits, love never stops, love never ends, and we can live in that love now and forever if we will just open our eyes. Halleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed.

---

<sup>i</sup> Pauli Murray, "Loves More Enduring Uses," *Dark Testament: And Other Poems*, NY: Liveright, 1970.

<sup>ii</sup> James Baldwin, "To Crush a Serpent," *Playboy* January 1987.

<sup>iii</sup> Carlyle Marney, *The Suffering Servant*, Abingdon, 1965.

<sup>iv</sup> Ayisha Siddiqi, "ON ANOTHER PANEL ABOUT CLIMATE, THEY ASK ME TO SELL THE FUTURE AND ALL I'VE GOT IS A LOVE POEM," published by The Eco Justice Project.