



SERMON TITLE: Mary: A Case Study in Faith

DATE: April 11, 2021

SCRIPTURE: John 20:10-18

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SERIES SUMMARY

“These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ” (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

We are continuing in our study through the Gospel of John. This is message #60, and we are getting close to the end. ... Of course, last week was Easter, and we looked at how Mary, Peter, and John first encountered the empty tomb. And, we zeroed in on how John “saw and believed.” That is, he saw the evidence that Jesus had risen, and he believed Jesus rose from the dead before he saw him alive face-to-face. And, we began talking about what faith in the risen Christ looks like. This week, we will continue to look at the nature of faith in vv10-18 as we see how Jesus made his very first public appearance to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. There’s no better way to understand God-connecting faith than to look at this case study of Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus on Easter morning. Mary teaches us three things about faith.

1. *Faith rests on truth.* — Reynolds Price and C.S. Lewis were both English professors and fiction writers. They both point out that John’s account of the resurrection is not written as fiction or myth or legend. They include too many unnecessary details and things that ancient fiction writers did not have the background and understanding to include. Both men also talk about the resurrection narratives are written as factual, eye-witness testimony to a historical event. The point is, there’s an eyewitness voice underneath John’s resurrection stories—an “I have seen the Lord” reality to what’s written that we must take seriously. We can hear this when you take vv10-18 and change the third-person pronouns (she, her) to first-person pronouns (I, me, my). Try reading it out loud in first-person, and you’ll see. If you do not believe that these stories are believable, eyewitness accounts—“I have seen the Lord”—you will not come to have a God-connecting faith. John is saying, “Receive what I’ve written as truth or reject it as lies, but don’t take what I’ve written and “spiritualize” into spiritual lessons. Faith, true God-connecting faith, rests on the truth that these stories are based on eyewitness testimony of an actual historical event. It’s the only way you can be sure that all the promises God makes to you are real and true.

2. *Faith comes through grace.* — Luke 8 tells us that Mary Magdalene was one of a team of women disciples who helped fund Jesus’ ministry. We’re also told in Luke 8 that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. And being from Magdala (she was known as Mary the Magdalene like Jesus was known as “the Nazarene”), she was definitely from the wrong side of the tracks. Early Christian tradition also tells us that she was a prostitute. Her life was a wreck. She was a broken person, and Jesus had put her back together. Now, Mary was totally “clueless” about Jesus rising from the dead. You would think since Jesus had told his followers many times in his later ministry that he would suffer and die and on the third day rise from the dead that she would at least have thought it somewhat possible. But she missed all the clues. Jesus’ promise, the stone rolled away, the two angels inside the tomb, and Jesus himself, who she thought was the gardener. But she missed all the clues. There is a profound point here that’s very personal, not just a principle. The only thing that makes logical sense to Mary is someone has stolen Jesus’ body, and she is doggedly determined to find it.

The point is—faith always comes by grace. Salvation always comes by grace. Isn't this a great way for Jesus to teach that his salvation is only by grace? It's not by our works; it's by his works. It's not by what we do; it's by what he did for us on the Cross. It's not us trying to find him; it's him calling to us by name.

Jesus was very intentional about choosing to reveal himself to Mary as the very first person to see him alive from the dead. Who came to the empty tomb? Peter was there. John was there. Mary was there. But Jesus did not show himself until it was just him and Mary. Jesus was deliberate because we see here the divine priority of grace. Mary was on the outside of every single category of 'inside/outside' the world had. She was a woman, not a man. She was poor, not middle class. She had been deranged, not sane. She was immoral, not moral. She was on the outside of everything. This is the Gospel—the Gospel is that God's salvation does not come on the basis of merit. It doesn't come on the basis of pedigree. It doesn't come on the basis of race, class, or gender, or pecking order. What is the Gospel? The Gospel is the unrighteous are in, and the self-righteous are out. The Gospel is the humble are in, and the proud are out. The Gospel is not that you try to give God a perfect record, but that Jesus gives you his perfect record—*by grace through faith!* This is what Jesus is helping us see. *Faith rests on truth. Faith comes through grace and...*

3. *Faith works through love.* Cleary, Mary loved Jesus more than all the others. Think about it. From the beginning of this chapter, we see that she's the only one who goes there on the third day. She's the only one who stays there. She is not going to go away. She is looking for a body, and she is not going to leave until she finds the body. She's even willing to take on one of the grave robbers—{she thinks the gardener is in cahoots with the graverobbers}—"Give him to me"—that's love. And, when Jesus calls her by name, and she recognizes him, she grabs hold so tight, not wanting to let go, that Jesus has to tell her, "Don't cling to me so tightly. I'm here—I'm not yet going back to the Father." Where did love like this come from? It's simple. She knew she was a sinner. She knew she was broken. She knew how big her debt was. Her great love for Jesus came b/c she understood grace. She understood how much her sins had been forgiven.

The bottom line is this— "To the degree that you understand your need for grace, to that degree, faith explodes in your life in the form of love." (Tim Keller, "Hope in Times of Fear", p88)

Discussion Starters —

1. Begin by reading John 20:1-3 and 10-18. Try reading it out loud and changing all the third-person (she, her) pronouns to first-person (I, me) pronouns.
2. How does seeing John's resurrection stories as real, eye-witness accounts help see the truth of stories?
3. Then ask the question: Why is Mary a great case study of faith? What do we learn in this story about faith that can help us walk by faith in our daily lives?
4. What does this story teach us about the relationship between truth and grace?
5. What does this story teach us about the relationship between grace and love?
6. How does Jesus let the disciples know that he's not angry with them for denying and deserting him?
7. What is your biggest "aha" and/or "take-away" from this passage and this message?