



Mother's Day, May 8, 2016
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The Story: The Resurrection (various verses)

Years ago, we used to go to Hunan Gardens for their sizzling rice soup, and afterwards, we'd walk across to Baskin & Robbins for desert. Any of you ever do that? One night, after dinner with my mom and dad, we all started across the parking lot for ice cream. Rachel was maybe 4 or 5 at the time. She was walking with Nana Carol but got excited about ice cream and started running across the busy street without looking. Nana was too far away to grab her but, when she saw what Rachel was doing—and the cars speeding into the parking lot—she took her huge purse and threw it at Rachel, knocking her off her feet. Of course, Rachel was ticked. "Nana, what did you do that for?" She didn't realize that Nana, through extraordinary means, was trying to save her!

Last week, we heard of the extraordinary means by which God saved us—the cross of Jesus. It was shocking to read how the long-awaited Messiah was killed, but it shouldn't have been a surprise. I shared 16 ways in which the Old Testament predicted the crucifixion of Jesus. This was God's plan all along: to send his own son to pay a debt we could never pay.

But the cross was only half the plan. This week, we come to the rest of the plan. We are about to read an account of the resurrection of Jesus. And everything rides on this. If the resurrection is just a myth... then all of this is a sham. We are just deluding ourselves, and we ought to turn this into a community center and go home.

But if it is true... then this is the moment that changed the course of eternity. And of course, we believe it is true. The resurrection of Jesus is the anchor point of all of human history. The crucifixion paid for our sin, but the resurrection declared that Jesus really was who he claimed to be—the son of God—and had the right and power to offer eternal life to all who would follow him.

The Story weaves together the resurrection accounts from all four gospels, so I'm going to read from it—pages 382-384. And as we do, I want you to watch for the central character in the story—besides Jesus—okay?

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the

tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'" So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

(Peter and John ran back to the tomb and, after seeing the empty tomb, returned to their home. We continue in John's gospel:)

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken away my Lord," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

So who jumps out as the prominent character in this moment? The central witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a remarkable woman named Mary Magdalene. On this Mother's Day, I'd like to look at Easter through her eyes. First, let me ask this: What do you know about Mary Magdalene? That she was a woman who washed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and dried them with her hair? That she was a woman of questionable morals? Maybe even a prostitute? How many have heard these things?

Well, none of them are true. They were later inventions and speculations. Let's look at what we do know about Mary. She was from a town called Migdal—that's what "Magdalene" means. It was three miles from Capernaum and was a commercial center. Mary might have been wealthy, because Luke 8 tells us she was one of a group of women who supported Jesus from their own means. And she was apparently a leader, because nearly every time she is included in a list of names, hers is first. That means something in the Bible.

We know one other thing about Mary: Jesus delivered her from demonic possession. In some horrible way, her body became home to, not one or two or three, but seven tormenting evil spirits. And Jesus, in one of his amazing acts of power, set her free.

Aside from Luke 8, the only place Mary Magdalene appears in the New Testament is in connection with the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus. But boy does she appear there! When Jesus was crucified, she was there. When Jesus was removed from the cross, Mary was there. When Jesus' was placed in the tomb, Mary was there. And on that first Easter Sunday, it was Mary who came to the tomb at the crack of dawn to honor Jesus in his death by anointing his body with oil. It is Mary who was told by the angels that Jesus was alive. It is Mary who was told to run to the disciples with this news. In fact, the Orthodox Church has a wonderful nickname for Mary because of this: The Apostle to the Apostles! And finally, Matthew, Mark and John report, it was Mary to whom Jesus made his first appearance after his resurrection.

Others are mentioned. Details of the accounts vary, but unanimously the gospel writers affirm that Mary of Magdalene was the star witness to the death, burial, resurrection and appearance of Jesus. Several things struck me about this story this week.

First, it speaks to the authenticity of the resurrection. For us in the 21st Century, there is nothing remarkable about a woman giving testimony to something she has seen, but at the time of Christ, it was unheard of. In Jewish courts, the testimony of women was not valid. So, if you were the only witness to a murder and offered to come before the court with your eyewitness account, your testimony would not have even been heard. It didn't count. Women didn't count.

So if you were trying to convince the world in writing that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead, the last thing you would want to do is make a woman your eyewitness. No one would believe her. Even the disciples disbelieved her. Luke tells us the eleven thought her words were "nonsense." There is only one reason that all four gospel writers would include the inconvenient detail about Mary and other women being the first witnesses to the resurrection. Because it was true! If this were made up, it would have been much more credible to have the male disciples as the first witnesses. But they were hiding somewhere in Jerusalem, scared out of their minds. It was Mary and other women who had gone to the empty tomb to honor Jesus and were first to be told of this great good news.

Which raises a second question: Why did Mary go to the tomb in the first place? This was dangerous. Remember, a stone had been rolled over the door, and it had been sealed to prevent any tampering. There were even highly motivated guards on duty that would pay with their lives if they failed. Jesus had been crucified. His followers had been scattered to the wind. The Jewish authorities backed by the

might of Rome had crushed this phony Messianic movement, and all that was left was to sweep up the last, fading embers of a movement that had once burned so hot.

So all the disciples—the hand-picked eleven, including Simon whom Jesus nicknamed Rocky (of all things)—were in hiding... terrified. They were certain that, at any moment, they would hear the footsteps of soldiers coming for them, too. The chosen disciples of Jesus were cowards.

And Mary was brave... incredibly brave. When the eleven abandoned Jesus to the cross, Mary stood vigil with him. As they cowered in a room somewhere, Mary witnessed his burial. And while the twelve continued to hide in the darkness of night, Mary rose early to return to the tomb...to pour oil on Jesus' body—to mourn him, to honor her Lord, the one who had set her free and restored her dignity. But to do this—to be identified as a follower of Jesus at this moment and in that place—was risky. But Mary was so faithful, so devoted, she was willing to take the risk.

I wish the men had been braver. I wish those of my gender shone more brightly in this story, but we don't. It is the women who are heroic—whose devotion to Jesus outweighed whatever fears they might have had for their own safety.

Back in Genesis 1, we are told that God created man in his own image as male and female. God is not male or female, but in both male and female we gain a more complete view of God. And there is something about the nature of women that gives us a deeper glimpse into the devotion of God—the faithfulness of God, the sacrificial nature of God. I know that is a generalization and there are exceptions, but I think most of us would say that there is something about the way women are created—something about that maternal nature—that is courageous and faithful and fierce in its devotion.

A friend told me this week of a time when he was a little boy shopping with his mom. Apparently, there were knives on the top shelf of this store and as she reached up to pull something down, she disturbed the display and carving knives began to rain down upon him. He told me, "You know, I think as dads we would probably have grabbed our child and pulled him to safety. But I'll never forget what my mother did. She lifted her arms above me to catch the knives. She was cut, but she kept me safe."

I have seen such selfless courage in my mother. I have seen it in my wife and frankly, in my daughter, too. I would like to believe I would stand strong and protect my family and friends in a time of crisis, but there is something about the way God has wired women—the Mama Bear syndrome—that is awe inspiring and a little frightening in its devotion and faithfulness. Jesus once said he longed to gather his children like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wing—a protective covering. Mary's devotion is illustrative to me of that protecting, covering instinct of God that I think is so often and so clearly revealed in the lives of women.

There is something profoundly admirable and inspirational about this woman Mary who, in the face of hopelessness, grief and significant risk, was unalterably devoted to her Lord... utterly faithful. And that brings one more question to mind. According to three of the four gospels, Jesus appeared first to Mary. He didn't have to. His resurrection body apparently allowed him to appear and disappear as he chose. Later that afternoon, that's what happened with two disciples walking to Emmaus. And that night, he appeared in the midst of the eleven who were still hiding behind locked doors.

Jesus could have appeared to his disciples that morning. Jesus could have appeared first to Peter, his chief apostle. The risen Jesus could have appeared first to anyone, but he chose to appear to Mary of Magdalene first—a woman, a second-class citizen whose testimony would be disbelieved and mocked. Why did Jesus appear first to Mary? Maybe because she showed up... she showed up while his disciples cowered behind closed doors. In her faithfulness and devotion, she showed up not because she believed she would find a resurrection. She brought oil to anoint a dead body. As far as Mary knew, that walk through the dark streets of Jerusalem was taking her to a place of heartache and mourning, of broken dreams and despair. But even so, there was nowhere else she wanted to be. Even in death she wanted to be with Jesus.

So she showed up, and so did Jesus. I find this inspiring. Every one of us is going to reach a time in our lives when our dreams are shattered, our hearts are broken and all we experience is despair. Some of you are there right now! In those times, it is easy to do what comes naturally... hide, retreat, avoid and evade and hunker down. But something powerful happens when, even in dark, despairing times, we keep showing up, keep praying, keep going to LifeGroup, keep coming to church... keep looking for Jesus even when our hearts are broken. That can be the moment of resurrection! That is the moment when Jesus appears.

You know, to our shame, the church has often treated women as second class citizens, but Jesus never did that. And his ultimate expression of the value and worth of women disciples came at the most important moment of his life: when he appeared as the resurrected Lord to a devoted, courageous and faithful disciple named Mary of Migdal. There is much that she can teach to us.