

The Third Day, Living the Resurrection

John 20:1-18

February 18, 2024

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

The resurrection of Jesus Christ profoundly changed the lives of those who followed him. Because Jesus was resurrected on the third day, we know God offers new beginnings regardless of what the facts of our present reality may seem to be telling us. Jesus' resurrection offers us hope and the assurance that God is present not only in our brightest moments but also in our darkest hours.

Today we begin a new sermon series where over the course of the next six weeks, we'll take a close look at five Resurrection appearances with some of the closest people to Jesus. To better understand their stories, we're doing an all-church study of the book, *The Third Day, Living the Resurrection* by Bishop Tom Berlin, a bishop to the United Methodist Florida Conference. These encounters with the risen Christ that he writes about shaped who these people were and how they saw the world and their experiences can change us too. These stories will help us find the source of the power that enabled the disciples to move from following Jesus to carrying his message to the world. And you know what? I think you will find that those disciples are just like us. They were imperfect. They needed forgiveness. Sometimes they were afraid. They experienced setbacks and failures in their lives. Some had difficult pasts, and none could imagine their future after witnessing Jesus' death on the cross. We'll look at the experience of Simon Peter, the first disciple to call Jesus "Lord" but then later denied even knowing Jesus. We'll spend some time with Thomas' story, whose crisis of faith left him doubting the words of his closest friends when they told him that Jesus was alive. We'll take a look at those two disciples who met the risen Jesus after the news of the Crucifixion had spread, as they were returning to their hometown of Emmaus. In week five, we'll hear about Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and how that encounter not only changed his name from Saul to Paul but how it also changed his entire life. But today, we begin with the story of Mary Magdalene. If you are someone who has ever lost hope, I think you'll be encouraged by this message today.

Meet Mary

Before we look at our scripture passage for today and what took place at the tomb that morning, I want to tell you a little bit about this person called Mary Magdalene. She is called Mary Magdalene because her name was Mary, and she was from the city of Magdala. Magdala was a small fishing town, located on the Sea of Galilee not far from Capernaum and the other towns where Jesus gathered his disciples. Even though scripture never mentions Jesus traveling through Magdala, he certainly could have because of the close proximity to his known travels. Tradition says that Mary was an immoral woman, often given the label of prostitute. However, there is actually no scriptural basis for believing this label applied to Mary or that she was any more sinful than any other person. She is often confused with other women in the Scripture, especially other Marys. But what we do know about this Mary is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her. I think it's important for us to remember that at the time of Jesus, and long before, what they called demons, today we know were struggles with mental health. Mary, apparently a woman some means, was so grateful for her new life that she devoted herself to supporting Jesus from her own resources and then traveling with him and his disciples. Meeting Jesus gave her a new life full of purpose and meaning.

We know from scripture that Mary was one of the only eyewitnesses to both the crucifixion and the resurrection. While the gospel writers do not fully agree on exactly who was present for both

events, they all agree that Mary was there. Why is this so important? Here's why. In the time of Jesus, the testimony of women wasn't trusted. In fact, it was thought to be worthless. Women weren't even allowed to be legal witnesses in the Jewish courts. And so, if you were the gospels writers, and your goal was to convince the world that Jesus is the Messiah, why in the world would you make your key witness to the resurrection a woman? There is only one possible answer. Because it was true.

Let me pause here for a minute and say this. If you are someone who has been made to feel insignificant, like what you say doesn't matter, that you have less value than others, take a look at Mary and realize that even if this is how others view you, this is not how God sees you. God doesn't just use the rich and powerful, God wants to use each of us, no matter what the world says. You have a God who loves you, calls you beloved and wants to do great things in you, just like Mary. She never could have imagined that she would be the first eyewitness to the most significant event in the history of the world.

Mary at the Tomb

In Mark's gospel, we read that Mary stood by and watched as Christ was buried in the tomb. Preacher and evangelist, G. Campbell Morgan, believes that she stayed through most of that first night watching to see what would happen, and only later had she gone home. Can you imagine the thoughts that must have gone through her mind as she stayed in that lonely cemetery, thinking about what had happened? Here was the one who had delivered her from her demons, and now he was dead. She must have wondered, are the demons going to come back? Is my life going to go back to being what it was before I met him? All sorts of things must have gone through her mind as she waited there in that cemetery.

We read that she came back that next morning so early that it was still dark. The original language says she came literally between 3-6am. And she found that not only was her Lord really was dead, but the body was missing. And she was beyond herself with grief and began to cry but her crying was unnecessary. She did not yet know that her Lord had been raised from the dead. She was so overcome with grief that she couldn't comprehend what was happening even after the angels told her that the Resurrection had taken place.

When the Bible says she came to the tomb while it was still dark, it is referring to more than just the physical darkness. Mary came while it was still dark in her mind and in her soul. She still did not have all the facts that Christ was alive, that he had risen from the dead. She didn't know how near he was, even when he spoke to her.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Then Jesus called her name, "Mary," and she turned and saw that it was the Lord. She was overcome with joy. She recognized Jesus, not by sight but by the sound of his voice.

I wish I could hear how he said her name. Wouldn't you want to hear how the One who loves you, has created you, redeemed you, says your name? You get closest to it when someone who loves you says your name. When Jesus said, "Mary"—the lights went on. No one speaks her name like Jesus does. No one speaks your name like Jesus does. He's the Good Shepherd. Mary is experiencing it. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep by name. Mary is not a number, she is a name, a being, a person who is dearly loved.

This is what the Resurrection does for our lives, as well. It gives us hope that death will not have the final word. That death is not the end of the story. Author Tom Berlin puts it this way, "This hope begins when we understand that while the Resurrection is cosmic in scope, changing the way we understand the rules of life and death for everyone, it is also very particular. It is intimate. It is a proclamation to the masses. It is a whisper in our ear." Using Mary's name reminds us of the name Jesus gave himself saying, *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. John 10:14-15*

What is true of Mary is true for every follower of Christ. We all carry anxieties over our past struggles. Whether it is something as strong as an addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling or perhaps it is as strong long-lasting as a grudge. Maybe its an emotional wound or deep scar from a past trauma. Some of our demons are not choices we make but things that have happened to us. When I was reading my first draft of this message to my husband, he reminded me to include medical diagnoses and diseases that makes it feel like your body is betraying you. His Parkinson's Disease makes that very real to him. Veterans take years to recover from the PTSD of war. Women who have been victims of sexual violence find themselves fearful even years after the assault. People of color, having endured microaggressions and outright racism, can find themselves hypervigilant in social settings. We all carry heavy burdens that can damage relationships or cause us self harm. Large or small, they impact the trajectory of our lives and pull us towards destructive habits, behaviors, mindsets and relationships. Often we keep them in them in the dark place because they feel heavy and hopeless.

When the resurrected Jesus was with Mary in the garden, he showed his ability to pierce the darkness, to lift the weight and to bring new life. No problem that she carried at that moment was too dark, too heavy, or too hopeless by comparison to the power of Christ to make things new. This is why today, the presence of Christ in our lives gives us hope. Remember how the Gospel of John begins, we heard it at our Christmas Eve worship. John words introduce us to the power of Christ and the foreshadowing of the Resurrection. *"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness doesn't overcome it." John 1:5*

In the darkness of the tomb, light broke in unexpectedly. Angels appeared dressed in white, in contrast to the dark of the morning, and Mary didn't even blink. Every other time in the Bible when someone meets an angel, they fall down or hide their face. But Mary looked angel square in the face and said, "Where is he, do you know where they've taken him?" She was so intune with her own pain, so aware of her own loss, that she did not realize that Christ was standing right in front of her until... he said her name.

And suddenly, we begin to see in the dark a new courage. Mary is transformed. What has changed in Mary's life? Nothing, really? Soldiers, still there. Reason to be afraid, still there. Persecutions, still there. What has changed is that Jesus has called her name and that changed everything for her. That is something the world can't understand. It looks Christ followers like you who can be in the darkest seasons of your life and yet have courage and faith. Even amid your tears you keep seeking, you keep knocking, keep asking. It's because Jesus has called your name.

Conclusion

You may be on a journey where you wonder if God sees you or has the power to change your life of the life of someone that you love. That is what happened in Mary's life. She was an ordinary, overlooked woman with a sinful past with no societal rights whatsoever. She was someone who had given up hope of ever having a healthy, normal life. And yet, she was the first

person in history to tell the disciples (and the world for that matter) that Jesus Christ was alive. Do you know that she became known as the *Apostle to the Apostles* for her role in sharing the news of the Resurrection with them? She had nothing in that culture except the fear from being identified with Jesus, and yet, she had everything. Her sinful past did not have the last word because Jesus called her name. Her searching, her unanswered questions, her weeping in the dark did not have the last word because Jesus has called her name.

The third day started so poorly for Mary and yet it proved to be the greatest day of her life. It gave her the confidence of God's power that could not be shaken in the days that followed. It was the day she found the hope that she shared for the rest of her life because Jesus called her by name. And Jesus calls you by name. He rises from the grave. He overcomes death. We'll go home today and nothing's changed externally. We have the same life we go to that we had when we left this morning. What changes is you and me. When Jesus calls our name, we become lionhearted. In our tears we become feisty with faith. We go announce to others what we've seen, and when we are ridiculed or mocked, we have the power to stand by God's grace. This is the power of the Resurrection.

Let's pray: Jesus, we praise you that the death Mary Magdalene witnessed on the first day did not rule the third day. You conquered the grave and rose to life again, giving us the hope of new life too. Help us to live each day as Resurrected people, confident that we follow a living Savior and that the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is with us and within us. May our hope be a beacon of light in this dark world. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Grow. Pray, Study for the Week of February 18, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Holy God, touch me with the power and assurance of the early disciples, as they shared and lived the Good News. Empower me to be your hands and feet in this world. Remind me that many are hungry, many are homeless, many are lonely, without friends or fellowship. Remind me of the many in need and show me ways to offer life and hope and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Monday, February 19

Scripture: John 20:1-10

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Observation

Very early on Sunday, Mary, Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" found Jesus' tomb empty. Notice her first report: "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." We'll see this week that the gospels made it plain that none of the

disciples were waiting hopefully for Jesus to rise from the dead. Mary simply wondered if “they” (grave robbers? the authorities?) had taken Jesus’ body.

Application

Mary went to the tomb “while it was still dark.” She didn’t expect to find Jesus alive, but she was eager to care for his body as soon as possible to express her devotion. (The Jewish laws Jesus had challenged forbade that work on the Sabbath.) How can you nurture a desire to go to Jesus first, even in times of darkness or discouragement?

Prayer

Loving Lord, when Mary first found the tomb empty, what had happened there went stunningly beyond her imagination. Open my heart and mind to trust in the unimaginably good news of the empty tomb. Amen.

Tuesday, February 20

Scripture: John 20:11-18

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “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 and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means *Teacher*). Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

Observation

Mary thought Jesus was “the gardener.” In symbol, he was — Adam failed in the first garden (Genesis 3), but Jesus (the “second Adam”) would tend earth’s “garden” well (Romans 5:15-21). Mary didn’t recognize Jesus by sight, but it seems his beloved voice, the way he said her name, was unmistakable. Then Jesus sent Mary as the very first eyewitness to the risen Christ.

Application

Mary knew Jesus’ voice. She had listened carefully to what he said. (Unlike most Jewish rabbis in his day, Jesus taught women as well as men — Luke 10:38-42). How can you come to know the “sound” of Jesus’ voice? What practices and choices can make your relationship with Jesus personal, a link between your heart and his?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, for Mary just the sound of your voice saying her name turned darkness to light, despair to joy, in a flash. Give me ears to hear the ways that you call me by name. Amen.

Wednesday, February 21

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus’ dead body. Very early on the first day of the

week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Observation

The oldest manuscripts we have of Mark's gospel end at 16:8. Some later manuscripts contain either a short or a longer ending (reflected in the footnotes in many English Bibles). We don't know if the abrupt ending was Mark's intention or reflects an interruption or loss of what he wrote. But even as it stands, verse 6 said Mary and her companions had heard the good news: "He has been raised."

Application

Mark's ending makes some people wonder if we can trust the gospels. Author Phillip Yancey said such passages actually point toward the gospels' honesty: "Accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb sound breathless and fragmentary the early reports seem wispy, mysterious, confused. Surely conspirators could have done a neater job of depicting what they would later claim to be the hinge event of history." How is the way you live your daily life shaped by whether you find the gospels essentially credible?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, the most loving thing the women could think of to do was to complete your burial. But you had so much more in store for them — and for me. Lead me on to a life lived in the light of your resurrected life. Amen.

Thursday, February 22

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn't here, because he's been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, 'He's been raised from the dead. He's going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' I've given the message to you." With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there."

Observation

Having set down Jesus' prediction that he would rise after three days (Matthew 16:21), we might expect Matthew to say, "So on the third day the disciples gathered, eager to greet the risen Lord." Not even close! He said, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb."

These very real women he wrote about felt “great fear and excitement,” a reaction much like most of us would have to an unexpected encounter with the supernatural.

Application

All four gospels said women, led by Mary Magdalene, were the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “If someone in the first century had wanted to invent a convincing story about people seeing Jesus, they wouldn’t have dreamed of giving the star part to a woman. Let alone Mary Magdalene.” What does Jesus’ trust in Mary to share the good news of Easter tell you about how Jesus saw the value of both women and men in his new creation?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you called your first followers, and now me as I follow in their footsteps, to a great adventure. Help me be honest about both the great fear and the excitement your call creates. Help me conquer my fear and follow you. Amen.

Friday, February 23

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn’t find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn’t know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn’t here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Human One must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn’t believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

Observation

Even Jesus’ death didn’t dim the women’s loyalty. They returned to his tomb “very early in the morning on the first day of the week.” They didn’t find his body, but did find two men in gleaming clothes who said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn’t here but has been raised.” They reported this to the eleven, and again we see the bluntly honest way the gospels reported what happened. “Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn’t believe the women.”

Application

These accounts make it clear that no one expected to see Jesus alive that Sunday. They were gripped by preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would be and do, and of what death meant. In what ways can preconceived ideas make it harder for you to trust the Bible’s testimony? When have you found greater joy and peace after letting God overturn some fixed idea of yours?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, whatever else your disciples were, they were not gullible and naïve. It took a lot to convince them you were alive again—but once convinced, not one of them ever gave up their faith. Give me a steadfast heart like theirs. Amen.

Saturday, February 24**Scripture: Luke 8:1-3**

Soon afterward, Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

Observation

Mary Magdalene has come to play such a large role in speculative popular fiction about Jesus that it's a bit of a surprise to see how relatively small (yet vital) a role she played in the gospels. Luke 8 is the only mention of her name before Jesus' cross and resurrection. It was extremely brief, yet it showed that she had good reason to become one of Jesus' deeply committed disciples.

Application

At times, as in this reading, the gospels give almost no details. When they do, the details may differ, and we wonder which is most accurate. But on the big story, they all agree. Pastor Frederick Buechner wrote, "When Jesus came, the whole course of history was changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact ... all the way down the twenty centuries since [Jesus' life,] there have been countless different kinds of people who in countless different kinds of ways ... have been grasped by him, caught up into his life ... in this man, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, to give a new kind of life to anybody who turns toward him in faith, even to such as you and me." Jesus changed Mary Magdalene's life for the better. In what ways has he changed your life? How will you remain open to let him continue changing your life for the better?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, Easter was not a one-day event — it changed everything, for all time. Let it continue to shape and change me, and my world, for the better. Amen.