

*Then the disciples went back to their homes,<sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb<sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.*

<sup>13</sup> *They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"*

*"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."<sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.*

<sup>15</sup> *"Woman," he said, "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."*

<sup>16</sup> *Jesus said to her, "Mary."*

*She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).*

<sup>17</sup> *Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "*

<sup>18</sup> *Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:10-18)*

### **Mary Magdalene: I have Seen the Lord!**

Did you know that this past week was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first moon landing? I'm sure I'm not the first person to tell you that. A friend of mine invited people to share their memories of that event on Facebook. I was six years old, so my memories of it are pretty hazy. But many people have that event etched into their minds. Of course, there are other events that have had that effect on people. Pearl Harbor. The assassination of John F. Kennedy. 9/11. You may never forget where you were or what you were doing when those things happened. And they changed the way you looked at the world. But I suspect that most of us have other things that have had an even more profound effect on our lives. It might be a good thing, like how you met your spouse. Or you might have suffered some personal tragedy like the death of a parent, or a house burning down, or losing a child. Whatever the big turning points in your life have been, you've probably talked about it with people you're close to. In today's conversation with Christ, Mary Magdalene experiences one of those life-changing events and then tells the disciples, **"I have seen the Lord!"**

#### **I.**

Most Christians know the outline of this story. Jesus died on Friday afternoon and he was buried just before sundown. But it wasn't really a "proper" burial because it was so rushed. Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, so they could do nothing for Jesus that day. So very early Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and several other ladies set out for Jesus' tomb to give him a proper burial. But they had a problem: the tomb was sealed with a large stone. The ladies didn't think they could move it. But they didn't know that an angel had come down and rolled the stone away to show the world that Jesus was already gone. They reached the tomb and found it open. Then Mary Magdalene ran back to town to tell Peter and John. The other ladies went into the tomb and saw two angels there who told them Jesus was alive. They then went back to tell the disciples. While they were heading back, Peter and John and Mary came to the tomb, apparently by a different route. Peter and John went inside and saw the wrappings from Jesus' body laying on the ground and they left. And that's where this conversation with Christ picks up: Mary Magdalene was standing outside the tomb weeping.

Why was she weeping? She was already grieving. But she had also leaped to a conclusion: grave robbers had stolen Jesus' body. Grave robbers are not a big issue for us today, but they were a huge problem in the ancient world. Just like today, people were often buried with jewelry or other treasures. Most cemeteries probably have thousands of dollars worth of stuff buried in them. So Mary thought that these guys broke in to Jesus' tomb and dragged his body off into the bushes somewhere so that they could unwrap it and get whatever was valuable. Then they ran off, leaving the body to rot.

Of course, she was totally wrong. But it was devastating to think of someone she loved being treated that way. Jesus had no intention of leaving her in her grief. His conversation with her includes at least two attempts to get her to remember his promise to rise and find hope. Mary bent over to look inside the tomb –

which she hadn't entered yet – and she saw two men dressed in white sitting on the shelf where Jesus' body had been laid. Those two men were angels. They asked her, **“Woman, why are you crying?”** Isn't that an odd question? They were in a graveyard. People weep in graveyards all the time and the reason is pretty obvious. But they were trying to get her to stop and see what had really happened.

But Mary gave them kind of a sharp answer: **“They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.”** Then she turned away. She cut off the conversation. So Jesus himself came to her. Mary didn't recognize him. Why not? She had been weeping, so she probably had tears in her eyes and didn't see him clearly. Again, she turned away from him very quickly, so she didn't get a good look at him. And the big reason: she didn't expect to talk to Jesus. He was dead. So she concluded that he was the gardener – and just maybe he had something to do with this grave robbery. Jesus very gently tried to get her to look past that assumption. He asked her, **“Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”** In other words, “Come on, Mary! Look, it's me!” But Mary didn't catch on. Instead she demanded that he tell her where the body was so that she could bring it back to the tomb.

That's when Jesus forced her to see the truth by saying her name. He had to force her to see it, because everything that she was thinking made sense. It was just wrong. Jesus had done the unexpected, indeed, the impossible from our point of view. He had risen. He had defeated death and he defied all human experience and his body lived again. Why did he do that? To free us from death. To take our sin away. That is totally unexpected, too. What does the human heart expect? Your conscience is designed to tell you when you sin. It makes you feel guilty. Part of that message is that you deserve to be punished. That's what guilt really means. And our consciences are right. Every one of us sins every single day. Sometimes we do obvious and terrible things. Sometimes it's more subtle. Sometimes it's just nasty words or even thoughts that no one else hears. But God says that all sin deserves to be punished with death and hell. He gave us a conscience to make sure that we understand that clearly. So, the human heart knows that death and hell are coming. And guilt hurts. So people come up with all kinds of ways to hide from that guilt. Some people self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. Some people work themselves into an early grave. Some people plunge into all kinds of activities and social engagements so that they don't have time to think. Some people simply sink into depression. But on our own, no one expects God's answer.

God's answer is Jesus. He came and lived a perfect life in our place. And he wrote that life into our record in God's court. Jesus suffered hell itself and died on the cross. He paid the penalty our sins deserve. And God has entered that into our record. Jesus rose and told us that we are forgiven. He promised us that we will rise and live. All our sin is erased and we are now perfect in God's eyes. And no one on earth could ever expect that to happen. God had to tell Mary Magdalene. God had to tell us. So he did. Just like Jesus came to Mary, just like he gently tried to get her to look at him and see that he was risen, just like he sent angels to remind her of his promises, just like he forced her to finally see the truth, Jesus has come to us in our lives, in the way and the time that was best for us, and forced us to see the truth: he has risen. We are forgiven. And we will live with him forever. We can say what Mary said: **“I have seen the Lord” – something you never expect.**

## II.

That changed everything for Mary. She was weeping and heartbroken. But once she saw Jesus, sadness was replaced by joy. She cried out, **“Rabboni!”** “Teacher!” Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the risen Christ. And just like she raced back to tell Peter and John the bad news, now she got to race back and tell them the good news: **“I have seen the Lord!”** Mary was already a believer. But she had not understood that Jesus had to die or that he had promised to rise. Only when she saw him did she finally put it together. That changed her life. Seeing the risen Christ makes everything different.

That's true for us, too. Obviously, we haven't seen Jesus with our physical eyes. But we have seen him by faith. And Jesus actually put Mary into the same category with us. He told Mary, **“Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”** What was Jesus saying? Their relationship was changing. Before he died, Jesus lived among his followers as a normal human being. So when they were sad, they could hug each other. When they happy to see each other, they could embrace. But from this moment forward, that's not how it would be. Jesus was returning to his Father and our Father, to his God and our God. As one of us, Jesus worshipped and trusted in the same God we do. But now, his time of humiliation, his time

of hiding his glory and power and living like one of us was over. Forty days after this, Jesus would ascend into heaven and for at least the next two thousand years we Christians would only see Jesus by faith. Even Mary would have to trust in his promise and see him only by faith.

But that is still seeing Jesus because our faith is not in a fairy tale. And it's not a decision we make. It's not the end of a logical argument. Our faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. He gives it through the gospel. That's where we see Jesus. And he keeps that faith alive through the gospel we hear in sermons like this and in the gospel we see and touch in baptism and communion.

Seeing the risen Christ makes our lives so different. My friends, think how different your life would be if you didn't have faith in Jesus. Think how many hours you've spent in church and reading your Bible and praying. Think how different your relationship is with your spouse or your children or your parents because Jesus is part of that relationship. Think how many choices you've made that were the right choice, but that were the harder choice but you made that choice because your faith drove you to live the life God calls us to live. Think how many hardships you've faced, how many losses and hurts, how much grief and sorrow. Now think how different your reaction to those things would've been without your faith in Christ. My friends, we are different people because we have seen Jesus. And there is no part of our lives that is the same as it would've been without him.

Every time we repent of our sins and come to him for forgiveness, we see him again. And he changes us more. Every time we come to communion or to church, every time we remember our baptism, we see Jesus by faith and he changes us more. Every time we rejoice in his blessings and find comfort in his promises when our lives hurt, we are reaping the unending blessings that come from knowing him. Those blessings simply would not be ours without the change that God made when he showed us the risen Christ and gave us faith in him. What a tremendous gift God has given us. Treasure it for as long as you live! Say with Mary, **“I have seen the Lord” – something that makes everything different.**

Remember that truth always. One of the things that I get to do as a pastor is visit those members whose health and age makes it hard to come to church. Many of them have memory problems. Sometimes, it's short term memory. They'll ask me the same question over and over again, sometimes within the space of a few minutes. But you know what? Those people usually know exactly who I am and why I'm there. They remember Jesus, even if they can't remember what we talked about five minutes ago. Sometimes, it's a more profound memory loss. They don't recognize me or even their own children, at least not consistently. They are unsure where they are, or when they are. Sometimes, they've lost years of their lives and they're stuck at another time and place. Quite often when that's true, they don't remember how to examine themselves or what communion is, so I can't give it to them anymore. Yet, most of the time, the name of Jesus still means something to them. They still trust in him. They still want to pray and hear about his love. Sometimes, they've lost the ability to respond or to acknowledge my presence at all. But even then, Jesus works through the gospel. He preserves the faith in their hearts even when their minds are gone. Those elderly, confused believers have seen the risen Christ in the gospel and God changed their hearts. He does not abandon them when their faculties fail. He doesn't abandon us. Our Father in heaven showed us our Savior. The Holy Spirit gave us faith in him. Jesus gave us the gospel to keep that faith alive. Every time we hear that message, he shows himself to us. And he will bring us to eternal life and we will finally see him with our physical eyes. That's his promise. Amen.