

“Mary Encounters Jesus: A Journey from Misery to Mission” – John 20:11-18

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and meet me in John 20...

Today we will be looking once more at the encounter Mary Magdalene has with the resurrected Christ. We looked at most of the story last week, on Easter, but there were a few details we did not get to or that need some elaboration. So let's review.

To begin we saw, at the start of John 20, that Mary arrives at the tomb of Jesus early in the morning only to find the stone had been rolled away. She immediately assumes that the grave had been robbed and someone had stolen the body to add insult to injury. She flees the scene to find Peter and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, and, once she locates them, she says to them, *“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him”* (20:2). Alarmed, Peter and John leave Mary and run at once to examine the tomb themselves and find it as Mary has indicated—empty, with the linen cloths lying neatly where the body once was and the face covering folded nicely on the side. At some point they depart the tomb and head back home.

Mary later returns and an interesting series of events takes place. Look again at verse 11 and following...

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ ¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’” (John 20:11-15)

She's pretty confused, to say the least. And you would be too. Despite the teaching of Jesus on the matter, no one was expecting Him to rise from the dead on the third day. Mary clearly wasn't. That possibility is not even on her radar. A crucified and risen Savior is not the Savior anyone was waiting for. “Jesus and his salvation did not fit her expectations, which functioned like a filter or screen, making it impossible to see him right in front of her.”¹ That's literally what happens. Jesus approaches her, she looks at him, and she doesn't recognize Him. She doesn't truly see Him. She confuses Him with the gardener. Recently, in a book called *Hope in Times of Fear*, Timothy Keller makes some astute observations about Mary's initial reaction to Jesus:

“In this, Mary represents the entire human race. Acts 13:27 tells us, ‘The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets.’ We must not conclude that the residents of Jerusalem were unusually spiritually blind, so that if Jesus had gone to Rome or to some other place the people there would have realized he was Son of God and Savior. No, the problem is one shared by the entire human race.”²

And what's that problem? He continues,

*“‘No one seeks God,’ Paul wrote in Romans 3:10, meaning *not* that no one seeks for the divine and transcendent or for spirituality in general, but that no human being seeks the true God. We seek*

spirituality, but the human heart always wants a God who fits our desires, a God we can control, who doesn't challenge our self-assessments and narratives. Whatever Mary's idea was of Jesus at that moment, the figure standing before her did not fit it. The message of the Bible is that God never fits human categories and conceptions of what he should be."³

That's true, isn't it? Therefore,

“There would be no hope for us if God waited for us to make the first move. We would be lost if he stood apart from us, tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for us to figure out for ourselves who and where he is. Unless he calls us by name, we would never come to him.”⁴

And is that not what we see with Mary? Look at the next verse, verse 16...

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher).”
(John 20:16)

At first she saw only the gardener, someone she suspected may have been an enemy or someone who aided the enemy in stealing the body. Then Jesus calls to her by name and like a sheep who knows her shepherd's voice, her eyes are opened. What a touching scene. What a beautiful picture of what Jesus describes in John 10. And some have wondered if the way John depicts the story is meant to call to mind the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden. There are parallels.

Several scholars have noted that John seems to apply a “Genesis lens” to the story from chapters 18 to 20, which on multiple occasions seems to develop a “garden” theme (cf. Gen. 2:8-16).⁵ We don't have time to investigate that this morning in , but here we simply note that Mary confuses Jesus with the gardener in the garden. She's wrong on one level, but on another level there is some irony to her conclusion.

You'll recall from Genesis that the first Adam was a gardener and it was in a garden that humanity originally betrayed God, “making a garden a fitting place for his [Jesus'] final betrayal and also a fitting place for it to be overturned [in a resurrection].”⁶ In a sense Mary's assumption that Jesus was a gardener may reveal what God always had in mind.⁷ One commentator writes, for example, “Jesus had fulfilled in his person the demands of God and therefore had become the second Adam, the Gardener assigned by God (see Gen 2:15), here standing in his ‘garden’ on the first day of the ‘week’ (cf. 20:1)” and now in “the second Garden, the Gardener himself came to tend his (new) creation (Gen 2:15; Rev 21-22).”⁸ Another writes, “Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles...”⁹

Similarly, perhaps this Mary in the second garden is analogous to Eve in the first. Edward Klink captures the possibilities well:

“In the first garden a woman was asked a question that would soon reveal that the questioner intended to become the source of grief (Gen 3:1), but in the second garden a woman is asked a question that would soon reveal that the questioner had already become the source of grace. The serpent promised that the first woman would be like God, whereas Jesus announces that the second woman would be with God. The difference is stark, for the actions in the second garden return the creation to the intended state of the first garden....In this way Jesus fulfills and repairs the fall of his creation in every way. Even the serpent has been silenced and his grief-inducing question has been replaced with a grace-filled response of the true Gardener!”¹⁰

What order and harmony God has worked into history, amen? But sometimes it is hard to see at first glance or from our vantage point. When it comes together, we see God's wisdom and love. But as things unfold, we're often left feeling quite confused. I imagine that was how Mary felt in verse 17. She has just had her eyes opened

to see Jesus. She cries out, “Teacher!” Overflowing with emotion, she reaches for Jesus. And we read something strange...

“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...’” (John 20:17a)

This is a difficult verse for a number of reasons. Indeed, D. A. Carson described the verse as one of “a handful of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.”¹¹ Part of the confusion arises from the King James Version, which translated Jesus’ words, “Touch me not”¹² But is Jesus really saying that He was not to be touched and, if so, why? Well many who favor the KJV sometimes argue that Jesus was not to be touched because in His resurrected state or his pre-ascension state he was too holy for such contact, but that doesn’t seem to be the case given that later in this very chapter He will invite Thomas to touch Him (20:27). And we also know from Matthew’s Gospel that the other women who encountered the resurrected Jesus “took hold of his feet and worshipped him”, apparently without any reproof from Jesus that we know of.

While there is a lot of debate on how to understand the verse, there is not much disagreement among translators that the translation found in the KJV is not helpful. Indeed, you’d be hard-pressed to find other English translations that follow the lead of the KJV because it is generally agreed that it offers a poor and misleading translation of this verse, given the tense of the verb and context of the passage. Even the New King James Version changes the prohibition from one involving “touch” to one involving “clinging”. That’s how almost all the mainline translations take the phrase. “Stop clinging to me” or “Stop holding on to me.” Evidently Mary, in her rapture at seeing Jesus, embraces Him. She clings to Him tightly. And Jesus, at some point instructs her, *“Do not cling to me, for I have not ascended to the Father”* (20:17).

But even this is a bit odd. Of course, she would embrace Jesus “with all her physical and emotional strength.”¹³ This was the man who delivered her from demons and restored her to sanity. This was the Healer she thought had been stripped away from her for good. You would cling to Jesus too. But why, we may wonder, would He have her stop and what does all of this have to do with the ascension? It almost seems to diminish an otherwise transcendent moment. There are a lot of suggestions and, if you are curious about them, I’ll provide some sources in the transcript that outline them well.¹⁴ I think our time together today will be best served, however, if I just offer what I think is the most likely understanding.¹⁵

It seems to me that Mary is clinging to Jesus because she is afraid to lose Him again and one of the things that she has yet to realize is that His departure from her is to her advantage. In fact, earlier in this book Jesus told His disciples as much:

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” (John 16:7-11)

There are a couple of things that Jesus hints at there that may be in mind in His encounter with Mary here in chapter 20. First, Jesus suggests that one of the reasons it is better for Him to depart, which is what happens at the ascension of Jesus (which follows the resurrection), is because when He goes He would send the Holy Spirit to indwell His people. “The ascension was a necessary precondition for our reception of the Holy Spirit as an indwelling, life-giving presence.”¹⁶ We have considered in the past why the Spirit inside us in this present age is better than Jesus beside us,¹⁷ but if that’s something you want to look deeper in I would recommend a book called *Jesus Continued*, by J. D. Greear, which you can check out in the church library.¹⁸

Furthermore, the ascension was necessary for other reasons, including Jesus’ work in the heavenly temple for our full atonement (Heb. 9:11-14), His rule (Phil. 2:9-11), and His ministry of intercession on our behalf (Rom. 8:34), a ministry fulfilled by one who is sympathetic with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:14-16). And because of these

realities—linked to His ascension—Paul can assure us, “*all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*” (Rom. 8:28). So it’s better not to hold on to Jesus as the disciples knew Him during His ministry, so that He can ascend to the Father’s right hand. This could explain why He tells Mary she will have to stop clinging because He will be departing to the Father in due course. He will be leaving, but before then, there is some work to be done. Part of that work He will give to her in the second half of the verse (which we’ll get to in a bit). She can let go for now, she will see Him again.

The second thing Jesus foreshadows in chapter 16 is that when He departs His followers will relate to Him in a different way. They will have to because He will no longer be physically present with them. Paul gets at this in 2 Corinthians when he tells his readers,

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.” (2 Corinthians 5:16)

To know Christ according to the flesh is to know Him as the disciples once did. But James Montgomery Boice explains, “To know him as we do today is to know him spiritually, that is, by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit who reveals the Lord Jesus Christ to us as the Son of God and Savior.”¹⁹ Or as Bruce Milne suggests, “Jesus is trying to help Mary understand that from now on, although the resurrection appearances are a special exception, Jesus is not to be known by means of touch, as had been the case”, but instead the ascension to which Jesus refers would “imply a new kind of relationship with Jesus, to be shared with all disciples in every age and place, that of faith-union through the Holy Spirit sent by the ascending Lord (cf. 14:18-26).”²⁰ Edward Klink explains it like this: “The issue then is not whether he can or should be touched; Jesus is simply not concerned with Mary’s approach toward him at this moment. Rather, Jesus is concerned that Mary—and every other disciple—comes to understand how he is to be approached from this moment onward.”²¹ Or, if you’ll humor one more citation, listen to Richard Phillips...

“Because she thought she had lost the physical nearness of Jesus, we can imagine her excitement at seeing him restored to bodily life. But Jesus would not have her hold onto the past and the former mode of relationship. He was not stifling her desire for a relationship, but merely pointing her to the higher mode that would ensue with his ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit....Christians today, living on the other side of Christ’s ascension and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, enjoy a higher form of communion with Jesus even than the disciples who knew him in the flesh. We have spiritual communion with the living Savior through the Spirit who indwells us. As Paul expressed it: ‘Christ ... lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20).”²²

So I know it could sound harsh for Jesus to impose some social distancing by saying to Mary, who moments ago was experiencing the height of grief, “Do not cling to me”, but there seems to be more to it than may meet the eye given His immediate reference to the ascension. He appears to be saying, “Mary, I know why you are clinging to me. You were grieving over the loss of our relationship, and now you are thinking that you will grab me and never let yourself be parted from me. But you don’t understand. When I ascend to the Father and sit at his right hand and send the Spirit, then everyone in the world who believes in me will be able to have personal intimacy with me. Through the Spirit I will be able to come to you, to commune with you in love, to have my presence within you. Let me go to the Father, and you—and all who seek it—will have fellowship with me beyond anything you can imagine.”²³

In light of this, what does Jesus want her to do instead? Look at verse 17 again, this time in its entirety...

“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” (John 20:17)

So what does Jesus want Mary to do? He wants her to evangelize, to spread the good news. Of course, it is appropriate for Mary to adore Jesus, but not in a way that abandons the mission. Jesus is encouraging a certain attitude in Mary that is one that we should take to heart as well. The attitude “is not one of passive amazement but of active mission.”²⁴ I think sometimes we are so busy trying to cling to Jesus that we too fail to share Him. We turn focus on worship and what it means to us instead of on sharing the good news with others so that they can share in our worship. Mary knew something of that oversight as well, which is why she had to learn that “she should not go on and on clinging to Jesus and enjoying the blessing of it when there was a group of broken men and women no great distance away who had as much need and right as she to know of his rising.”²⁵ Milne explains why this is important to note:

“If that is implicit, the application to the church is a direct one. Tragically, over the centuries the Christian community has shown a far greater interest in sitting at Jesus’ feet, holding on to him amid the comfort of his presence, than in going out into the world to share the good news of the risen Lord with broken, needy hearts who have as valid a claim to know of him as we.”²⁶

Brothers and sisters, we are Great Commission people. A people sent out on a mission to make disciples, who make disciples, who make disciples. Is that not the charge of Jesus to His followers? Is that not one of our 3GCs? Our core values? Our non-negotiables? Then we must not content ourselves to merely sit and soak in the comfort of our worship services when there is a lost and dying world around us in every direction. This does not mean that worship is unimportant. It’s vitally important. In fact, I would say that it’s more important, more ultimate, than mission. But in this age, we are called to both. Not one or the other. And mission exists for the sake of worship. John Piper made this point famously in his now classic treatise on mission, called, *Let the Nations Be Glad*:

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. So worship is the fuel and goal of missions.”²⁷

We have an eternity to cling, in other words. Now is the time for us to also be couriers. And who was Mary to be a courier to? Who was she sent to? The disciples. The ones who would soon be known as the Apostles, the sent ones. She was sent to them. Talk about a privilege. Talk about an honor that was bestowed upon Mary Magdalene! And is this not God’s way? God is in the business of taking broken people and using them in mighty ways. Why would we doubt that God could or would use us? Because we have sinned? Paul was a persecutor of the church, with murderous intent. Jesus changed his life and sent Him out. Because we have a past? Mary was a crazy lady who was possessed by seven demons. Jesus delivered her and sent her to proclaim the good news on His behalf. You think your sin and past would exclude you from being used for His glory? Then you need to read your Bible, because that’s kind of God’s way. He only uses broken people. And if He wants you to be a trophy of His grace, then don’t sit there and try to dictate to Him that He’s not allowed to do so. No. Repent. Turn from your sins. Believe the Gospel. Jesus has died for your sins and risen from the dead. Trust in Him and He will use you for things that are absolutely important to Him. He will include you in His mission. Just like Mary.

And if we need further proof of that, then just listen to Mary’s message. What was she told to tell Christ’s followers? “[G]o to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (20:17). That’s a very interesting declaration. On the one hand, as many have pointed out, there does seem to be a distinction made between Jesus’ relationship with God (the Father) and our own.²⁸ He didn’t say that he was ascending to “our” Father and God. He said, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” His relationship to the Father is unique. He is the unique Son of God in a way that differs from how we have been made “sons of God.”

That said, on the other hand, we *have* been made “sons of God” in Christ. We have been adopted into the family. We are counted as children and coheirs with Christ. This is the glory of adoption and it is owing entirely to God’s grace. We didn’t earn it. Jesus died to secure it for us. And because He did for all those who believe, we have the right to call God “*Father*” like Jesus and Jesus now calls us “*my brothers*” and sisters (cf. Heb. 2:11-13; Psalm 22:22). Talk about good news. Jesus has changed everything for us. He has changed our status before God. We have moved from enemies and objects of His wrath to children on whom no condemnation will ever befall. And we get to tell the world that good news! What could be more important in this life?

If we reduce the passage down to its “bare essence,” then we see Jesus offering Mary three imperatives: “Stop clinging...go...tell...”²⁹ And what is her response? Look at verse 18...

“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’—and that he had said these things to her.” (John 20:18)

That’s called obedience. And we should do likewise, when God tells us to stop clinging, and get going and telling. And, church, that is exactly what He has called us to as well. I’ll close with Jesus’ words in our Great Commission. These are our marching orders. This is our life’s work. This is God’s call for you wherever He has placed you. So come, worship, savor the Lord. But then obey His command to make disciples so that others can do the same. Here it is:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

That’s what we are about at Southern Oaks. That’s what we are to be about as God’s people. Is that what you are about? If not, then you’re wasting your life. And you only get one. And maybe you are still thinking, “Well, I’ve already blown it too much. He would never use me.” Then I say to you again, listen to the message Jesus puts on Mary’s lips. He doesn’t tell her to go “to those miserable deserters, those miserable deniers. You tell them the day I want to see them, the day after tomorrow, they have one chance...” He could have said that. That would have been more than they deserved from Jesus. But that’s not what He has her say to them. He says, “*go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*” He includes them. Such is the power of grace. The power of the cross. My brothers. Your Father. Your God. That is true of us, through faith in Christ. Yes, even us. Even me. Even you.

May God grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, living hearts to cherish these truths, and feet to carry that good news to neighbors and nations...

Let’s pray...

¹ Timothy Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter* (Viking, 2021), 84.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 84-85.

⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁵ Edward W. Klink III, *John* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 845.

⁶ Ibid., 851.

⁷ “The cross to be in Paradise, as the tree of life from which the first man had been raised from the dust as the primordial King, now the second Man, also raised from the dust in resurrection, took up his rightful place in the garden ... tilling the soil and caring for Eden from which the first Man had been banished.” Wyatt, “Supposing Him to Be the Gardener,” 38. Cf. Schaper, “The Messiah in the Garden,” 25. [cited in Klink, 851].

⁸ Klink, 851.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 146.

¹⁰ Klink, 851-852.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Downers Grove: Eerdmans, 1991), 641-642.

¹² Strangely, also followed by the NET.

¹³ Keller, 86.

¹⁴ Cf. Carson, 644-645; Klink, 846-847; Bruce, 389-390.

¹⁵ “Two approaches to this riddle can be discarded rather easily. Some liberal commentators have argued that Jesus’ warning proves that he was not resurrected in a true body, but the fact that Jesus later told Thomas to place his fingers in his wounds shows this view to be false. Others have suggested that Jesus needed immediately to ascend to heaven and present his atonement before the Father’s throne. Yet the Bible records Jesus as ascending later (see Acts 1:9–10), and an ascension on the day of resurrection is hard to imagine, given the Scripture’s silence about what would have been a pivotal event.” Richard D. Phillips, *John* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 639-640.

¹⁶ William P. Farley, *Hidden in the Gospel: Truths You Forget to Tell Yourself Every Day* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 88.

¹⁷ “Wearied or discouraged Christians will sometimes lament that Christ seems far distant. But he is not! Having ascended into glory, Jesus is now intimately close to each of the great multitude of his disciples on earth. Paul therefore urges us not to think we must engage in some mechanism to draw Jesus close to us: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?”” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)” (Rom. 10:6–8). Jesus lives in us by the Holy Spirit’s inward ministry of God’s living Word. This situation, however, had not yet fully come when Mary met Jesus outside the tomb before his ascension, so Jesus wanted to point her forward, not backward, for her hope of communion with him.” Phillips, 640.

¹⁸ J. D. Greear, *Jesus Continued...: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better than Jesus Beside You* (Zondervan, 2014).

¹⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 1577-1578.

²⁰ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 292.

²¹ Klink, 847.

²² Phillips, 640.

²³ This quote comes from Keller, 86.

²⁴ Josh Moody, *John 13-21 For You: Revealing the Way of True Glory* (Good Book Company, 2019), 137.

²⁵ Milne, 292.

²⁶ Ibid., 292-293.

²⁷ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.

²⁸ “Because of Jesus’ death/resurrection/exaltation, his disciples come to share in his sonship to the Father. The unique features of his sonship are of course presupposed (cf. notes on 1:12–13, 18; 5:19–30): the expressions my Father and your Father and my God and your God assume distance between Jesus and his followers, even as they establish links. But the emphasis here is on the shared privileges (cf. Rom. 8:15–16; Heb. 2:11–12, citing Ps. 22:22).” Carson, 645.

²⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on John* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 346.