

I Have Seen the Lord!

John 20:11-18

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

11 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 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.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

- John 20:11-18, ESV

Have you ever been so overwhelmed by pain and distress that you just couldn't see straight? Have you ever been so perplexed and so confused that you almost felt drugged by your overwhelming feelings?

When I think about these kinds of questions, three times from my life come to mind:

1. When I was a child, 11 years old, and my Nana died, that was my first experience of real grief, crying deeply and sobbing and questioning God's goodness.
2. On 9/11, I was working at Shine-FM in Baltimore, and I was assigned to be in the news room to gather the news as it broke and relay it to the on-air staff. When the twin towers fell, I remember being stunned in disbelief by what I was watching and having a hard time believing my eyes or putting what I was seeing into words for the announcers.
3. When Andrew was born at 30 weeks, weighing less than 3 pounds and in medical distress, we were concerned, overwhelmed with emotions, confused as to what was happening and why.

I don't know what your life memories hold, but I'm guessing you can relate at some level to what I'm saying. Still, I know I have never been through something as absolutely devastating and disorienting as what Mary Magdalene experienced in the death and burial and then missing body of Jesus.

When Mary of Magdala met the Lord, she was possessed by seven demons. Jesus cast these demons out of her, setting her free from unimaginable torment and bondage. In response, she became one of His most faithful followers. On at least one occasion, Jesus preached in the synagogue in her hometown. She followed Him from Galilee, where they both lived, to Jerusalem, and she was one of the women who stood at the foot of the cross as He died and who followed Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to the grave, so she would know where He was buried.

Mary Magdalene was the one to run from the tomb to go and get Peter and John to come and see the empty tomb, and she was the one to stay at the tomb, weeping, after everyone else had left. She is clearly deeply devastated, with very good reason: The Man who had set her free and changed her life, the man she left

everything to follow, the man who spoke words of life and who did amazing works of miraculous power, had died and been buried, and now His body had disappeared.

In her deep distress, Mary Magdalene has another life-changing encounter with Jesus, as she becomes the first person to see the risen Christ. This morning, I'd like us to walk with Mary through this encounter and see her as a pattern for how we can have seek Jesus by faith in our times of deep distress.

A. Why Are You Weeping?

We can see some admirable qualities in Mary, even in the deep blindness of her confused grief:

1. She went to where she had last seen Jesus and she stayed there.
2. She showed deep love and an unwavering commitment to Jesus, even when she thought all was lost. She not only remains at the tomb, weeping, but she still calls Jesus, "my Lord."

As Mary is weeping, she looks back into the tomb (We don't know for sure if she ever went into the tomb herself), and she sees two men in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. We don't really know what she thought about this sight. Maybe she couldn't see clearly through her tears. She obviously wasn't thinking clearly at all. John was blessed to be able to see the grave clothes and truly see and believe in the resurrection. For Mary Magdalene, even the sight of angels in the tomb is not enough to bring her to faith.

The angels ask Mary a simple question: "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" For her, this questions displays their ignorance of what she has experienced: "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*" And yet, the question shows not their ignorance but Mary's. She thinks she has good reason for her weeping. The truth is that she has no more reason to weep and every reason to rejoice. This day is now a day for rejoicing in new life, in victory over death. But she can't see it; so, she's weeping.

When we are in distress and are weeping, what are we not seeing? Why are we weeping? Deep distress and confused, disoriented weeping of the soul almost always arise from fundamental ignorance of the truth. I'm not saying we should never weep. The Bible tells us we can and should weep at times. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus and over the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem, and a whole book of the Bible is called Lamentations. The most common type of psalm is the lament, as we will explore in more depth this summer. Still, when we are utterly blinded by pain and distress and deeply disoriented in our grief, we are almost always suffering from an ignorance of the eternal realities behind our situation.

Mary did not understand and could not see that Jesus had risen from the dead. In our distressed weeping, what are we missing? Are we not seeing how God could be in control of such a situation? Or are we not seeing His goodness at work in the circumstances?

So, ask yourself: Why are you weeping? What are you not seeing?

B. Whom Are You Seeking?

Apparently, right as Mary is answering the angels' question, Jesus walks up to the tomb, behind Mary. As soon as she finishes answering the angels' question, she turns around and sees Jesus but does not recognize Him. We

could speculate all day long about why Mary didn't recognize Jesus: Was she blinded by the sunlight after looking into the darkness of the tomb? Did He have His back turned to her? Was she crying so much she couldn't see clearly? Or was there something about Jesus after the resurrection that sometimes made Him difficult to recognize? The last option seems most likely, given the fact that the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24 didn't recognize Him either, until He broke bread with them. Apparently, Jesus either looked different after the resurrection or He was able to keep Himself from being recognized somehow.

None of this is important, of course; it's just speculation. If it were important, John would have told us why Mary didn't recognize Jesus.

For us, we can make a connection here: Often, God is at work in our lives and we don't recognize Him. He is moving circumstances or revealing His truth, and we just don't see it; we don't recognize the work as His situation or the truth as His truth.

Jesus asks Mary the same question as the angels, but then He adds another vitally important question: "*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?*"

In your times of distress, whom are you seeking? What do you think you need? Even when you pray in times of distress, are you seeking an answer from God or are you seeking God Himself? Do you want the gift more than the Giver?

How do you know? Well, quite simply: What will you do if God says "No"? If God doesn't give you what you want, but He reassures you that He loves you and is with you and will never forsake you, will you be satisfied with that? Will you be satisfied with Him? Whom are you seeking?

Mary's response shows the depth of her confusion. Supposing Jesus must be the gardener (Who else would be here in the early morning hours?), she says, "*Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*"

How will she take Him away? Will she go back and get Peter and John, or will she try to move His body by herself? Again, she's not thinking clearly.

Jesus is ready now to reveal Himself, and so He says to her a single word, "Mary." And in the way He says her name, she knows He is her Lord. She knows that no one else knows her like Jesus and no one else speaks to her in such a deeply personal way as Jesus. She cries out through tears, "*Rabboni!*" which is a very intense form of the word for teacher, a form that shows great honor, something like Master-Teacher or Teacher-Lord.

I find it so deeply encouraging that Jesus reveals Himself so simply, so lovingly, so faithfully to Mary, when we've been shown clearly how blind and confused Mary is by her grief. I am so often blinded and confused by my ignorance. I don't have the answers, and I so often lack the right perspective, but Jesus loves me still. I see Jesus here loving Mary in her blind confusion, in her ignorance, and I am reminded that He loves me, too.

Mary responds as one who loves Jesus would respond. She cries out and then she falls at His feet and grabs hold of Him.

C. Do Not Cling to Me, for I Have Not Yet Ascended

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.'"

D.A. Carson is one of the most respected New Testament scholars in the world, and he says verse 17 "belongs to a handful of the most difficult passages in the New Testament." Why would Jesus tell Mary not to cling to Him, when just a few verses later, 8 days after this meeting, He would tell Thomas to put his finger in the wounds in His hands and to put his hand in Jesus' side? And what can the connection be between not clinging to Jesus and the fact that He had not yet ascended to the Father?

Well, without going into all the detail of the different viewpoints and possible ways to understand the grammar, we'll cut to the chase of the best, most probable explanation:

First of all, Mary's clinging to Jesus was very different from Thomas' touching of Jesus. Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds because Thomas had declared that was the only way he would believe. For Thomas to believe, Jesus is willing to be thoroughly examined. Mary, on the other hand, is already believing. She is clinging to Jesus because she is unwilling to let Him go. She is afraid He will leave her, and He is reminding her gently and lovingly that He is, in fact, leaving her, to ascend back to the Father.

And yet, His leaving is not the end of the story, of course. He had already promised in John 14-16 that He would send the Holy Spirit after His departure and that the Holy Spirit would indwell and comfort believers and that, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Himself would be coming to be with His disciples and that He would always be with them. So, Mary can't hold onto Jesus' physical presence, because He is returning to the Father and He will not stay with her and with His disciples as before. And yet, it is really for their good, because after the ascension, Jesus would dwell in their hearts by faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and would never leave any of them. So, she didn't need to cling to Jesus because she was never going to lose Him again.

Sometimes, in our fear and anxiety, we can act in foolish ways, desperately clinging to something we don't want to lose. I can even remember in my life having certain intense worship experiences where I thought, "I don't want to lose this feeling. I just want to stay here and experience this wonderful moment forever." And yet, I need to know that I can never lose Jesus. Whether I feel like I'm standing on top of the world or I feel low and dejected and alone, I am always with Jesus and He is always with me.

Jesus sends Mary off to the disciples with a message that would help drive home this truth to her own hearts as well as to theirs: "*go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*" What a profound, beautiful, and gracious truth. Because Jesus had conquered sin and death, because He had satisfied the justice of God and covered all of His disciples' sins with His precious blood, they were now children of God just as He was. He was a child of God by nature, and they were children of God by adoption, but they were just as surely children of God. God was now their Father, and God is now our Father, just as He is the Father of the Lord Jesus. God was now their God, and God is now our God, just as He is Jesus' God. Our bond is the same.

Jesus' prayer from the night He was betrayed was fulfilled, and we were explicitly included in that prayer: "*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*" – John 17:20-21, ESV

D. I Have Seen the Lord!

So, when Mary goes to the disciples, she faithfully tells them what Jesus told her to tell them. She tells them the good news of Jesus' resurrection and His coming ascension and of their new identity as children of God. She is a faithful messenger, but first she has something even more basic and profound she has to tell them, and from the text it seems like it was the first thing that bursts from her mouth when she enters into the room where they are: "I have seen the Lord!"

Yes, the word for "have seen" here is the same Greek word, *horaō*, used when John "saw and believed" in the empty tomb. She had really seen the Lord. She hadn't just caught a passing glimpse of Him. She didn't just think she maybe saw Him. She had seen the Lord, and she couldn't wait to share the good news!

We know not everyone who heard the joyful testimony from Mary Magdalene believed. Have you ever joyfully shared your testimony with someone only to have them respond with some lame unbelieving response like, "Good for you." Thomas would refuse to believe the testimony of Mary and of the rest of the eleven who saw Him. Sometimes, we just have to patiently wait until Jesus is ready to reveal Himself to those who need to see Him for themselves.

And yet Mary was a faithful witness. In a very short period of time, she went from being blinded by grief and confused by her devastating loss to being overwhelmed with joy and then faithfully telling others of what the Lord had done for her.

Conclusion: Where Are You?

What about you this morning? Where do you find yourself? Are you overwhelmed and devastated by grief? Are you confused and unable to see the goodness of God? If you're not there now, maybe you have been there in the past, and maybe you will be there again in the future.

In our grief and despair, we need to ask ourselves: Why am I weeping? What am I not seeing? Whom am I seeking? What do I think I really need?

Maybe we, like Mary, need to go back to where we've last seen Jesus and to remain there: To get on our knees with the Bible open before us and seek His face, refusing to rush through and rush on without Him. We need to come to church and praise His name and cry out to Him and seek the light of His face. We need to be sure we're not seeking an emotional experience but the Lord Himself, and we need to go where He has promised to meet us: in the word, in prayer, and in the gathered worship of His people. He is faithful, and He will meet us with what we most need: Himself. If you belong to Him, He will never lose you and you can never lose Him.

If you're here and you've heard the testimony of others and the words of Jesus Himself, and yet you just don't believe, maybe you're still lost in the confusion of your sin and the blindness of unbelief. You, too, should seek Him and ask Him to reveal Himself to your soul so that you may know Him, know His love, and never lose Him.