

Message: Believing

Have you ever had a broken heart?

I’m talking about an experience where you didn’t know how you were going to get from one moment to the next. You have to remember to breathe. You don’t know what do next or what to feel, besides grief. You feel like you’re having an out-of-body experience. Things are happening and you’re having conversations and yet you feel distant, like it’s all unreal. You just wish it would all go away and go back to the way it was.

That’s how Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdelene, felt that morning.

The events of the past several days are like a blur. How could things go so wrong so quickly? It wasn’t a week ago that they were having a party to celebrate Lazarus’ return from the dead ... then there was the parade ... everyone was feeling so good and everything was going so well.

But there were some things that didn’t make sense. Jesus cried during the parade. There was the incident at the temple. And, of course, the wonderful, but puzzling meal with Jesus, where Judas stormed out and Peter was shocked. Then there was the night in the garden, with Jesus crying out.

That’s when it got bad. Judas – can you believe it?, showed up with the authorities. Jesus was arrested. His enemies were ready. There were nighttime trials. Peter denied him. Beatings and whipping and humiliation – my God, did you see his face?! Pilate said, “Not guilty!” But then he gave into the pressure of the crowd.

That’s when it became unreal. They took Jesus outside the city to THAT hill and crucified him! Everyone else was afraid. They ran away. Jesus’ mother and other women were there. They saw it all. They heard his last words. They saw him take his last breath. They saw the spear pierce his side. They saw Joseph and Nicodemus take him down, put him in a tomb. They saw the soldiers roll the large stone in place and stand guard.

**They’ve spent the last couple of days in grief and mourning.
What else could they do?**

There were NO believers on that first Easter morning. No one believed in the truth, the reality of who Jesus was. If they had, they would have been waiting to have the REAL parade into Jerusalem!

None of Jesus closest friends, family or those who followed him believed. That’s because they didn’t understand. Even though Jesus told them, over and over again, what was going to happen, it was too far outside their frame of reference. They couldn’t get their minds around it. The empty tomb makes no sense. It didn’t then and doesn’t now. The only theories left are grave robbing or some other sort of intrigue, unless ...?

Mary of Magdala is our focal point. She’s the one John follows. Like others, she couldn’t make sense of what was going on. She was acting without understanding. Her response is remarkable. Mary was the first to see the stone was rolled away. Rather than staying silent, she ran to tell others. That’s when Peter and John ran to the tomb.

Both men enter the tomb, but only John’s response is recorded, “he saw and believed” (John 20:8). John didn’t see Jesus, but he saw that Jesus was gone. There’s something mysterious happening. The burial wrappings are still there in the shape of a body. That’s weird. Something strange is going on. John’s belief is small and new, but he’s open minded. Something’s up. Yet, the men remain silent where Mary rushed to share the news.

The next portion of Scripture is amazing. Mary encounters Jesus. John’s narrative is exquisite. We know what’s happening, who she meets, but there’s a powerful anticipation of her response.

“Who are you looking for?” (v15) Jesus says the same words the angels said to Mary. Jesus asks Mary the same thing he asked John the Baptist’s disciples three years earlier (1:38). Invitation is a mark of what it means to be a follower, a believer, a disciple. Jesus began his work with an invitation. That invitation continues with Mary – the first disciple to see the risen Christ. Jesus says the same words to us today, **“Who are you looking for?”**

The divine and the personal came together in one word: “Mary” (v16). Jesus spoke her name. And, in that moment, Mary’s perspective on reality changes. The world shifts. The tomb is no longer a place of death. The empty tomb is evidence to the power and possibilities of life!

Who is Jesus to you? The divine and the personal come together in our lives as well. Jesus’ encounter with Mary wasn’t a one-time event. It was the beginning of a movement, a new spirituality that has changed the world in powerful ways. And it continues to do so today ...

Jesus calls us – by name. Jesus said, “[*The shepherd*] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3-4). Those of us who follow Jesus always watch our children, family, friends and neighbors – those we invite, with great anticipation: will they hear Jesus’ voice calling them and respond? Will their lives change?

Amazing things happen when we listen to Jesus’ voice. Look at the evidence. Lazarus came out of a tomb. Mary found hope and a new life. My life changed in a dramatic way 20 years ago. Ask any believer here and you’ll hear stories of the power of Jesus’ life-giving and life-changing love. You, too, can have a new life in Jesus. It’s a better life.

I have to ask: what does the Easter story mean to you? Putting it another way, what frame of reference do you have? Do you trust God and believe in Jesus? Or are you at a place where you can’t suspend your disbelief? There’s a lot about this narrative and other parts of Scripture that are hard to understand. We’ve never met a resurrected person. Many people have never experienced the power of God directly. But, to ignore the evidence of eye witnesses and those who tell us about how lives have been changed just seems unwise.

The resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of our Christian faith. If Jesus didn’t come back to life, there’s no reason to believe Jesus is who he says he is. Without an empty tomb, we’re left with a really good moral story, but no confidence or faith in a new life, a spiritual life that lasts for eternity. Without Mary’s eye witness testimony, we’re left in silence with only grave robbing as an answer. But, with Jesus’

resurrection and the record of what Mary said, heard and experienced, we have a life-changing gift given to us. All we have to do is accept it.

Can you believe without understanding? Yes. Mary did. John did. I do. You can, but only if you completely trust who you believe in. Put your trust in Jesus now, your questions will be answered later.

There’s good news: you don’t have to wait to die! You don’t have to wait for one of those broken-hearted, out-of-body experiences. Jesus is present, here and now. All you have to do is believe and accept him with all your heart. You’ll find a wholeness and completeness to life.

I do have to give you a warning. Believing in Jesus will change you! It’ll change your life. You’ll see things in a new way. You’ll encounter the spiritual side of life. It won’t be easy. Your friends, family and co-workers will notice the difference. Change comes with a cost. You’ll also find that the change comes with great benefits.

The benefits of God’s grace are amazing: a love that can’t be overcome, a peace that comforts, guides and protects, and hope during good times and bad. And the greatest benefit of all? Those who believe will have eternal life in heaven with Jesus and everyone who’s gone before us. Death has lost its hold on us, for the love of God is a love that transcends all things, even the power of the grave. Those who believe know what comes: the wholeness, completeness and fullness of life now and life everlasting in heaven where there is no sorrow or tears, only joy, life and light.

**Rejoice with me for the victory is won!
Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Hallelujah!**

Let us pray ...

Holy God, thank you for this amazing demonstration of your power and love. We aren't entitled to it. We haven't earned it. We hesitate to look into the tomb, because it challenges our view of the world, our status quo. We are reluctant to believe, because it means that we need forgiveness. Thank you for the gift of the risen Christ. Thank you for sending us a Savior who leads by example, showing us a new way to live. Thank you for giving us hope and peace in a world filled with darkness and death. May we embrace your Holy Spirit and walk free from those things that limit and bind us. Make us a light to the world. In the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus. Amen.

John 20:1-18 (CEB)

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.

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.