

We have this thing as human beings where we feel the need to put on a plastic smile. We have this need to pretend everything's okay when sometimes life just isn't okay. We believe Easter changed the entire trajectory of history. Jesus died, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead. Not only as theological tenets, but this story somehow connects to our story. Easter somehow gives meaning and purpose to our story. We find a new way to view ourselves in the light of Easter. Easter means something about Jesus and it means something for you.

We are going to look at one of the first encounters on the first Easter morning several thousand years ago of a woman named Mary. The encounter of Mary Magdalene, one of the early followers of Jesus, and her experience searching for hope on Easter morning.

Here are five of the key things we're going to talk about.

1. We're going to talk about how to put things back the way they used to be.
2. We're going to talk about names.
3. We're going to talk about connectedness.
4. We're going to talk about mud.
5. We're going to talk about Verdi's Requiem.

John chapter 20 is the story of Mary Magdalene, one of the first early followers of Jesus. Here's how her Easter morning went several thousand years ago.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one on the head and the other at the foot.

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."
(John 20:11-13)**

Again, this is Mary Magdalene. She was one of the first followers of Jesus. She's part of this core who traveled with Jesus as he was going about his ministry. We learn from another passage what Jesus did for her and how he affected her life. Before Mary met Jesus, the Bible says, she had seven demons in her and Jesus exercised them out of her.

When Mary shows up at Easter—Jesus, is not someone distant from her. This is someone who matters deeply to her. And so in

one sense, her tears are very normal. She's in a graveyard and in this garden graveyard, you would expect someone to cry and weep. She's crying because she had a personal connection to this man named Jesus. Jesus changed Mary's life. Jesus was Mary's hope. She knew pre-Jesus and she knew now post-Jesus what Jesus had done for her and how he had affected her life.

You can relate to that. You may have experiences where parents, teachers or a boss has helped you along in your life. You look back and you say, "That person means something deeply to who I am today." If that's you, that's what Mary was experiencing. But that person who meant so much to her had been taken from her. ***"They have taken my Lord Jesus away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."***

In other words, Mary said, "Someone has taken my hope. Someone has taken how I understand the world to work and I don't know what to do now." Maybe you've had experiences like that. Maybe you have those days where you wake up and the kids are just driving you nuts. You're running late, miss information you need for the meeting that you're running late for, and then you get in the car and your car doesn't start. You kind of go, "What is going on? Who is doing this? Someone's got to be out to get me. Someone's trying to take my hope away."

We can relate to her experience and her story right here in this garden tomb on Easter morning. Watch what happens next though. Watch what happens when Jesus shows up. She doesn't realize at the moment it's Jesus but Jesus shows up, and watch what happens in this interaction between her and Jesus. We get a little bit more of this longing and this hope that she had.

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" (verse 14-15)

So Jesus helps connect the dots a bit more. He's like, "I know that your tears are something more than what would happen in a graveyard. There's something more going on."

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." (verse 15)

So a strange scene gets stranger still when Jesus shows up. She doesn't realize it's Jesus and thinks he's a gardener. She's more vulnerable. Reveals more about her longing. She said, "Hey, I don't

even care what's happened. I don't even want to know the story of why Jesus' body is not in his tomb. Just point me in the direction."

And then watch what she says, "I will go and find him. I'll go take care of it. I'll fix it. I'll go get him and put him where he needs to be. I will put things back the way that they were."

That's how Mary understands how the world works. She is saying, "Jesus, the physical presence, he's done something and my world needs to operate around him physically being here. And so I've got to go figure that out. Just point me in the direction and I'll go take care of it."

It's almost like she commoditizes hope. She is saying, "Hey, I know how to add the thing I need to add in order to make my life better. Just get out of my way and I'll take care of it. I'm going to remove the pain I don't want to experience. Get out of my way. I'm going to take care of it."

You can probably feel this in your own life, where you build this sense of control. You say, "I will fix this. I'm going to put things back before everything got turned sideways." And we don't realize what she didn't realize, which is the story has changed.

"Mary, there's no going back to the way things used to be. You're here now." And what Mary is going to find is that's actually really good news. So it's an emotional moment. It's a heartbreaking moment because you get the sense that Mary wants to wave a magic wand like you and I do sometimes. We wish we could fix the relationship. We wish we could get the perfect contact to find the perfect job. We all have this wish list, and we miss the fact that maybe something right in front of us is happening.

So in all of Mary's searching and longing for hope, probably in ways that you and I long for hope, Jesus is now going to respond to that. His response is fascinating. Jesus says to her,

"Why don't you get your act together? Mary, I can't believe you. You should be better than this. Mary, I don't really want to be around you if you haven't gotten the whole thing by now."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). (verse 16)

Jesus doesn't say any of that. Jesus says something to Mary that's amazing. Jesus says one word to her. He says her name "Mary." It's the first time; by the way, she's addressed by name here. When you speak someone's name to them, you are speaking dignity to them. You are saying, "You are Mary. You have a story. You have a history. We've been part of this, Mary." He finally addresses her. And at that moment she hears dignity. At that moment, in the midst of her searching and longing for hope, what Jesus does is say her name.

How Jesus responds to someone in that position is he speaks his or her name. He speaks dignity over him or her. If you're like me that's probably not how you and I speak to ourselves in our

search for hope. When life gets upside down, if you're like me, you probably don't speak your own name. We speak criticism to ourselves. We speak shame over ourselves. We speak doubt over ourselves and then we open the floodgates and let all those outside messages say the same thing. No one, not even us, is the voice of dignity in the midst of our search for hope.

Mary had the voice of Jesus say to her, "Mary." He speaks dignity. What God does, Jesus, God in the flesh, what he does for people who are searching and longing, is he speaks their name. He speaks dignity into their story and to who they are and when he does that, Mary's eyes are opened. She sees that it's Jesus. So when Jesus speaks his word to people and their longing for hope, their eyes are open to see God is standing right in front of them. Their eyes are open to see that their story somehow now has a whole different trajectory. And there's a new sense of meaning and value because God has spoken meaning and value to them.

He said Mary to her and she responded teacher to him because that was her way of signifying dignity to him. That was how Jesus related to her and how he changed her life was in that way. He speaks her name, Mary, and she speaks, teacher, to him.

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me..." (verse 17)

Mary saw it was Jesus and does what you and I would do. She holds on to him. In fact, in the original Greek language, the word is a pretty strong word meaning to cling. When I was in kindergarten, my first day of kindergarten, my mom tells a story that I grabbed onto her leg and would not let go because I did not want to go to school. I got a picture of Mary doing that. "Finally you're here. You're the one I've been waiting for. You're the one I've been searching for. The loss of you was a disappointment." She's going to do everything she can to make sure she doesn't get disappointed again. So she grabs onto him. What Jesus says is interesting.

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I've seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. (verse 17-18)

Jesus said, "Don't cling to me, Mary. That's how things used to work. But now the story is changing." So how does the story change now? Jesus talks about this thing called the ascension, which is an event that will happen a little bit later. It's filled with power. It will kind of set the whole thing in motion, the story of what comes next with the church. But for our purposes this morning, think of ascension as this idea that the things of earth and the things of heaven now connect. There is a connectedness to it. Somehow, in some way, they're being brought together because of Jesus.

So Jesus says to Mary, "Hanging on, clinging and holding on is how things used to work. Now there's a new way that things are going to work. The things of Heaven and Earth that you kept compartmentalize are now somehow connected. Mary, the story is changing." Did you hear his words there he said to tell the disciples, and this is for Mary and us, he said, *"I'm going to my Father and your Father. I am going to my God and your God."* In other words, "You're a part of this story, Mary. You wanted to hold onto the story because you felt that was the only way to the story." Now Jesus said, "Hang on. Things have changed now. You now are part of the story. You have access to the story, Mary. The connectedness that you so deeply longed for, that you were willing to push everyone aside to commoditize, now is yours." The story is changing. Jesus shows Mary there's a new way for her hope, a new way for our hope is learning to see our story from a different perspective.

What Jesus was saying to Mary on that Easter morning was, "Mary, I understand and you get your life, but now it's now time to turn your life and look at it from a different way. Instead of what you're missing, instead of what you want to get rid of, how might your story be connected to the story of God? Jesus offers hope when he says to Mary, "Mary, you have dignity and because you have dignity, your story has dignity."

Jesus begins to put the pieces together. Easter announces that when Jesus died on the cross the story was not over. When Jesus was buried, the story wasn't over. When Jesus was raised to life, your story isn't over. In a world we know we need to change, you don't have to believe any of this, you can look around this world and you know something has to change. Something has to change in us. Easter says that change is possible through Jesus and a relationship with God. The disconnectedness now can be brought together and you can be in relationship with God your Creator.

William Sloane Coffin, a Bible commentator, put this kind of idea in such a beautiful language. He said, "The true wonder of human beings is not that we are sinners, but that even in our sin, we are haunted by goodness. Even in the mud we can't forget the stars." You and I know what it's like to live in the mud.

You and I may be covered with mud right now. You may have on a plastic smile while wiping a bit of mud from your eyes and are pretending that everything's okay, but you know what it's like. You may be wondering if there are any stars left. But Easter says, yes, though life doesn't always work out on this planet, as we want it to. Somehow it's all being brought together and there will be a day. There is a glory. For now, though, you may feel like you're in the mud, that star is calling and pulling you forward. Hope has a name. It is Jesus. Jesus has a name that he is speaking and it's your name. He's speaking to people like you and me covered in mud fighting to see the stars.

What do we do with this Easter story? What can we learn from Mary's experience on Easter? Well, two things stand out to me. One, I think we need to find ways to fight to see. What are ways that you can help turn your own story to see it from a different perspective? What are ways that God has been at work in your story, right where you are, which would give you a different perspective and will help you see where God is at work? He's doing something in you. You're here because God is at work in your story.

I had a fascinating conversation with a friend of mine the other day. We've known each other for a while and we talk about the realness of life and faith all the time. In the middle of our phone conversation, the energy level of his side of the conversation started to ramp up in an exciting way. He acknowledged it and I noticed it. He was ramped up when he was telling me the story of something he discovered in the city in which he lives. He told me how he found out there's a certain part of the city that has a large immigrant population from West Africa, which is normally a French-speaking part of the continent of Africa. Now the thing you need to know about my friend is that he has an incredible skill and love for the French language. He has a love for the French culture even though he's American. His experience of French and French culture is kind of deeply woven into how God has made him.

He heard about this group of people and got connected with the local elementary school. They met with him and they said, "Oh, we've been waiting for someone like you because of your skill and your ability. We want it. We've got a young girl here who's just arrived in America. She's French and doesn't know any English. Would you be willing to teach her English by using your French language?" You could hear the excitement of not only the French side of this but also the immigrant side of this. Of helping to set the stage for a young girl to thrive in her new country. The whole energy ramped up so that it was getting me excited on this side of the phone. It doesn't mean his life is perfect or my life is perfect, but you can sense that we were on to something here. You begin to see your story from a different way, and how your story could connect into a bigger story. What Easter means is that your story has value. Your story has meaning and it's connected into the story of God. You and I need to find ways to turn the dial, to shift the story, to see it from a different perspective.

The second thing we can do is find ways to help other people see. God has put people in your world and has given you influence with them that no one else has influence with. What is the word? What is the action? Maybe it's just one thing. Like Jesus said one word to Mary. Maybe it's one thing that you could say that would help someone who's covered in mud fight to see the stars.

One of my favorite examples of finding hope in unlikely places happened during World War Two. In a Nazi prison camp outside of Prague, there was a prisoner who was a composer from

Vienna. This composer had an idea. He wanted to bring some of the beauty of music into this horrific setting. So he had this idea of recruiting fellow prisoners and said they were going to put on Verdi's Requiem. If you've ever heard it or attended a symphony like that, it's a 150-person choir and orchestra. The whole thing is a big piece and it's a difficult piece. It's also a powerful piece. This young conductor gathered fellow prisoners, recruited them, and taught them Verdi's Requiem in the midst of this horrific condition. The story culminates with them performing this in the presence of their Nazi captors. Now the thing you need to know about Verdi's Requiem is this. The words are in Latin, but the message is incredibly clear. The message of Verdi's Requiem is that God will judge the oppressor and God will defend the oppressed. In other words, this composer and this choir that he recruited said in Latin what they dared not say in German.

I hear stories like that I wonder what goes into a person that brings such hope into that situation. How do they see something when everything else is gone that makes them say, "You know

what, I'm going to lead a choir and we're going to perform this piece of music."

Whatever that is I want that. I want to know that no matter the circumstances somehow the story fits together. Somehow, maybe right here and now, God is doing something. That's what I hope you see today. I hope you see that your story has value and meaning. Hope has a name and his name is Jesus. Hope has a name; it's your name. May you hear when your Heavenly Father calls your name and invites you, son and daughter, into relationship with him. May you listen to his Holy Spirit who leads you to be a bringer of hope in this world. May you know Jesus has been raised to life so that, though you may find yourself in the mud, you can still see the stars.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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