

How To See Jesus

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John 20:11-18 — Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 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." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

We all love stories with an unlikely hero, stories with a character who we thought was unimportant or even bad, but then something happens, and that character turns out to be essential to the story's happy ending. For my fellow Harry Potter fans, think of Neville in the final book, or movie, and the crucial role he plays in defeating Voldemort, even though everyone thinks of Neville as being thoroughly mediocre. And for my fellow Home Alone 2 fans (I know there are some of you out there), think of the older woman in the park, with the pigeons. Initially, little Kevin is terrified of her, but in the end — thanks to her birdseed — she saves the day for him.

Our Easter story this morning features an unlikely hero in Mary Magdalene. She is the first one to see the risen Jesus, and she is the first one to share the good news of the resurrection. Really, in a sense, she's the one who gets this whole Christian thing off the ground. And yet, in all four of the gospels, she is hardly mentioned up until the crucifixion of Jesus. All we know about her is that she was a committed follower, a committed student of Jesus (along with numerous other women), and it seems that she helped financially support Jesus' ministry. Now, we also know that there's a story going around about this Mary: word has it that before she met Jesus, she was possessed by demons. Apparently, she had experienced immense mental and emotional distress in years past, and everyone who knew her knew about it. Who knows what they thought about her or how they treated her as a result? I'm guessing something like Kevin with the older woman in Home Alone 2.

And *this* is the person who the risen Jesus first appears to! Not to any of the twelve apostles, the main characters in our gospel stories, but to a lesser-known follower who has been devalued because of her sex and who has been stigmatized because of her past illness. Jesus chooses *her* to be the first preacher of the resurrection. An unlikely hero, indeed. So, what does it take for her to

become this hero? What does it take for her to see Jesus and to become the first preacher of the resurrection? In our story, you might have noticed, it doesn't happen right away. There's a process of recognition. There are a few steps in the journey for Mary Magdalene. This morning, I want to point out just one step on that journey: one thing that it takes for Mary to see Jesus — and one thing that it takes for us to see Jesus in our own way today.

But first, let's take a few steps back in our story: ten or so verses before this morning's passage, Mary comes to Jesus' tomb alone, while it's still dark outside, and as she gets close to the tomb, she realizes that the stone in front of it has moved away. Now, I'm just gonna assume that Mary felt like I would have felt, which is freaked out of my mind. And she does what I would have done, which is run away. She runs to find Peter and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, and tells them that someone has stolen Jesus' body. They all run back to the tomb together, and Peter and John, exhilarated, rush into the tomb. They see the grave-clothes there. The text actually tells us that one of the linens is folded up, so I guess the risen Jesus is a bit of a neat freak. But besides the linens, there's really nothing to see: no body around. Just an empty tomb. The two disciples don't really understand it, their exhilaration subsides, they start to twiddle their thumbs, and then they decide to go back home.

That's where our passage this morning begins: after Peter and John leave, Mary Magdalene stands weeping outside the tomb. Peter and John didn't understand what was going on, and nothing was happening *right then*, so they just moved along. But Mary sticks around. She shows patience and persistence at the tomb. She senses that something is happening here, that God is doing something here, and so she stays. She waits. She sits with her grief. And not only that: the story tells us that she goes back into the tomb. She steps towards the source of her grief, trusting that this is part of the journey.

Most of us, I'd imagine, don't like hanging around creepy tombs. And most of us also don't like getting too close to our grief, fear, and anger. It's much easier to push that stuff down, pretend like it's not a big deal, let it be and just keep moving. It's much easier to run away from the tombs of our lives than it is to step into them and see what life might come out of them. But in order for Mary to see Jesus this Easter morning, she's got to go towards, not away from, her grief and fear. She's got to sit with the horror of what transpired over the past three days: how the light of God that blazed in the person of Jesus was brutally snuffed out. She can't run away from that darkness, because otherwise she'll miss God's light breaking into it, she'll miss God breathing new life into that which is dead. And we too, friends, if we want to see Jesus, we can't run away from the darkneses in our lives, we've got to be open to finding Jesus in the tombs of our lives. Jesus is no stranger to grief or fear or anger. Let's take a step towards finding him there.

Now, in the times when Jesus shows up, when the presence of God breaks in, we don't always recognize it right away. In fact, this is a theme throughout the Bible. Angels are always popping in, and people are always mistaking them for men. In the very first book of Genesis, three angels appear to Abraham and Sarah to announce the birth of their son Isaac, and at first Abraham and Sarah think that they're just travelers passing through. In our story today, Jesus appears to Mary

Magdalene, and at first she thinks that he is a gardener. Apparently, even those of us who know Jesus pretty well, even those of us who have been walking this journey for quite a while, even we can miss Jesus standing right in front of us. We can encounter the presence of God, and because it's not what we expected, we can mistake it for something else.

For Mary, the moment of clarity, the moment of recognition, the beginning of the story's happy ending, is simply when Jesus says to her, "Mary." When Jesus speaks her name, everything clicks — she immediately recognizes Jesus, rushes to him, and embraces him. It's a beautiful, tender moment. And it's got me wondering: What does it mean for Jesus to call your name? What does it mean for God to address you, to speak to you specifically — not just to the world, not just to the church, but to *you*? How do you feel about that? Are you ready for that?

At the end of our story, Jesus actually tells Mary, "Stop embracing me." In other words, "Don't get used to this. You won't have me in the flesh forever, because I'm going back to God." And he does. But of course, that's not the end of the story of Jesus. Because Jesus' own spirit, the Spirit of God, comes to us, dwells in us, moves and acts in our midst today, as Jesus moved and acted in the world 2,000 years ago. We are invited, friends, to be on the look-out for this Spirit, to be on the look-out for God's light breaking into the world's darkneses, to be on the look-out for new life breaking out of the world's many tombs. May our hearts and minds become more and more open to noticing and to celebrating God's ongoing work of resurrection. Amen.