

That's a Good Question – 29

John 20:11-16

“Mary, Mary Quite Contrary and the Gardener You Should Know”

1. In 2006, all the world was buzzing about Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. It was a world-wide bestseller, with over 60 million copies in print in just over a year.
2. In the book Brown focuses on the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Drawing more from fantasy than history, Brown goes as far as to speculate that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, and had a child together.
3. While I feel that Brown's novel is nothing but a heretic's fairy tale, I do believe that there are some things we can learn from the character of Mary Magdalene, and the portrait of her that is painted in the Word of God.
4. Mary Magdalene had the unique privilege of being the first person to see Jesus following His resurrection. She was the first person to whom our Lord spoke after He had overcome death.
5. In the opening verse of John 20, we read that on, “The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.”
6. Mary discovered the empty tomb, but it had a very different effect upon her than the thought of it has upon us today. John says in verse 11, “...Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping...”
7. When the Lord appears to Mary in this contrary state, He asks her this question, “Woman, why weepest thou?” That is a good question.
8. Mary Magdalene's experience by the garden tomb speaks to us about how we deal with the grief and crises of our lives. She points us to the fact that what we see as a tragedy may prove to be the scene of the greatest victory.
9. There are three things that Mary says to us today. First of she says that:

I. YOUR SORROW MAY BE MEANINGLESS

1. In our text, Mary Magdalene was standing just outside the newly vacated tomb of Jesus, and the Bible says that she was “weeping”. The word translated “weeping” literally means to wail. It speaks of a visible brokenness. The tense of the word in verse 11 indicates that she kept on weeping and wailing.

2. While her emotion is touching, it is out of place. The angels seated inside the tomb asked her, "Why weepest thou?" Jesus repeated the same question just a few moments later.

3. All of heaven seemed to wonder why Mary was crying. In reality her sorrow was meaningless in light of the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead.

4. She cried because she could not find His body, but if she *had* found His body, then she would have really had a reason to weep.

5. Mary reminds us that there are times we sorrow over the wrong things. We stand looking at what we believe is a tragic loss and we sorrow when we should perhaps be shouting instead. Notice a couple of reasons for Mary's meaningless sorrow. First of all:

A. She was worried about an artificial burden

1. The angels asked Mary, "Why are you weeping?" In verse 13, Mary answered, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him."

2. Mary wept outside the tomb because she feared that someone had stolen the body of Jesus, and moved it somewhere else. For Mary, the Lord's death had been traumatic enough, but now it was just an added tragedy to have to locate His missing body.

3. In reality, Mary was crying over a burden and problem that didn't actually exist. The body of Jesus had not been stolen. It had been raised to life. She had created an artificial burden over which she sorrowed.

4. How often is it that we spend time worrying and sorrowing over things that have not even happened? We say things like, "What if..." or "Maybe..." and we create artificial burdens that consume our attention and weigh down our spirits.

5. Mark Twain once said, "I've been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." Edward Hale said, "Some people bear three kinds [of trouble]: all they have had, all they have now, and all they expect to have."ⁱ

6. There is no point, and no meaning in sorrowing over that which may not even be true. We can learn from Mary about shedding meaningless tears over mythological trials.

7. In Matthew 6:34, the Lord Jesus said, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

8. Notice another reason for Mary's meaningless sorrow. Notice not only that she was worried about an artificial burden, but notice also that:

B. She was weeping over an actual blessing

1. Mary saw the empty tomb, and blinded by her grief, she began to weep. In her mind, the missing body of Jesus signified yet another scene in the nightmare that had been the Passion week.

2. What Mary could not see through her tears is that the thing she was weeping about – the empty tomb – was actually the most blessed sight she had ever seen.

4. Could it be that there are times in our lives when we weep over things that we should be celebrating? Could it be that there is something in your life right now that you view as a tragedy, but it may actually prove to be a victory?

5. F.B. Meyer, in his book on John says, "We all make mistakes like this. Our treasures, whether of things or people, which had been our pride and joy, pass from us; and...we think that we can never be happy again; we suppose that God's mercies are clean gone forever...But, all the while, near at hand,...a transfigured blessing waits to greet us."ⁱⁱⁱ

6. Right now you may be grieving over a lost job, a broken relationship, a failed venture, a physical setback, or something else that seems like a loss in your life.

7. Mary speaks from the past, and reminds you that your mourning may be turned to dancing. Your sorrow may in fact be meaningless!

8. The British hymn writer, William Cowper, struggled with depression and mental illness throughout much of his life. Through the darkness of his struggle, however, he was inspired to write these lines of eternal truth:

*God moves in mysterious ways,
His wonders to perform,
He plants His footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with mercy and shall break,
In blessings on your head,*

*Judge not the Lord from feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace,
Behind a frowning providence,*

He hides a smiling face

9. No matter what we are facing, may we learn from Mary not to weep too quickly, for our sorrow may be meaningless.

10. Notice a second truth we learn from Mary Magdalene. Notice not only that *your sorrow may be meaningless*, but notice also that:

II. YOUR SPECULATION MAY BE MISTAKEN

1. When Mary saw the empty tomb early that Sunday morning, she instantly jumped to a conclusion regarding its meaning. She told the angels in verse 13, "...they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him."

2. Mary looked at her situation, and she speculated about what was going on, and it turned out that her speculation could not have been further from the truth.

3. Likewise, there are times we look at the things going on in our lives, and we interpret them according to our limited understanding. When that happens, very often we find out later that we were mistaken.

4. Mary reminds us that things aren't always what they seem, and we cannot always trust our judgment regarding the situations we face in our lives.

5. Notice a couple of things that led to Mary's mistaken speculation. First of all, notice:

A. How she assessed the situation

1. Mary looked at the slab of stone upon which the Lord's body had been laid. Now only the grave clothes remained, and Mary could only think of one explanation.

2. In Mary's mind, the only possible explanation for a missing dead body is that someone had come and moved it to another location.

3. Never mind that two angels were now sitting in the place where the body had lain, any one with any common sense knows that a dead body doesn't move, right?

4. You see; the reason Mary's speculation was wrong was because she had assessed her situation from a purely human perspective. She was looking through tears of discouraged doubt, and she could only think within the limits of a fallen, human world.

5. Very often, we view the challenges and struggles of our life the same way Mary viewed the empty tomb. That is, we assess the situation based only upon what we know to be humanly possible.

6. We will look at a problem, and we will say, "It looks bad." We speculate about the outcome, leaving the possibility of divine intervention, and miraculous resurrection completely off the table.

7. Charles Kettering was the former research head at General Motors. Whenever he had a problem that needed to be solved, he would bring all the engineers together, but he would make them leave all their slide rules on a table outside the meeting room. Kettering did this because inevitably, somewhere in the meeting one of the engineers would take out his slide rule, and before long he would be on his feet saying, "Boss, you can't do this."

8. So often we look at the problems in our lives and we crunch the numbers and do the measurements and we say, "It can't be done." Yet, by assessing the situation without including the power of God, we have made a grave mistake.

9. Notice not only how Mary assessed the situation, but notice also their mistaken speculation came from:

B. How she approached the situation

1. Look down in verse 15, and notice what Mary said to Jesus, whom she thought at the time was the gardener. She said, "Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away."

2. Still, Mary believes that the empty tomb is an indication that someone has taken the body of Jesus. Notice what she plans to do about this supposed problem. She says, "Just point me to where you have moved him, and I will take care of it. I will fix this blunder. I will carry him away."

3. Do you see Mary's problem. She has misjudged the whole situation, and to compound her error, she approaches the situation as if it is something she can fix.

4. Again, how often are we like Mary? We ignorantly speculate not only about what the situation is, but also about how we are going to change it as well.

5. So often, like Mary, we are completely mistaken about what we are facing, and we are equally mistaken about what needs to happen. We say, "If I could just do this," or "I wish I had this..."

6. When we speculate about the situations in our lives, because of our limited understanding we must sound to God like blind men debating the brush strokes of Van Gogh, or deaf men critiquing the symphonies of Beethoven.

7. When we come to what we speculate to be a tragedy, and a crisis, it would do us all good to remember what Moses said to the Children of Israel as they stood cramped between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea.

8. In Exodus 14:13, Moses said, "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD..."

9. Notice a third and final truth that we draw from Mary Magdalene. She says to us not that, *your sorrow may be meaningless, and your speculation may be mistaken*, but she says also this:

III. YOUR SAVIOR MAY BE MISSED

1. Look again at the text, and notice verse 14. This is an amazing verse. It says, "And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus."

2. The very One for whom Mary was searching, and the very One for whom Mary was sobbing, was the very One who stood just feet from her, and yet, the Bible says that didn't know it was Jesus.

3. In the midst of her crisis Mary missed the Savior. In her overwhelming sorrow, she overlooked His presence.

4. You know; it is possible that as we scramble to deal with our supposed problems, we can completely miss the nearness and presence of Jesus.

5. Years ago, an old preacher said of this text, "We are so absorbed in sorrow that we do not see Him who comes to soothe it. We often think He is the farthest when He is nearest."ⁱⁱⁱ

6. Mary Magdalene reminds us that there are a couple of ways that we can miss Jesus. Notice first of all, your Savior may be missed:

A. If you're not looking for His victory

1. Many writers and commentators have speculated over why Mary did not immediately recognize the figure of Jesus. Some have said that she simply did not look carefully at Him. Others have speculated that she could not see Him through her tears.

2. I venture to say that perhaps there is another reason why Mary did not recognize Jesus. She was looking for His corpse. She was expecting to see the battered, bruised, and wounded body of a dead Master.
3. This gardener was alive, and therefore, it did not immediately occur to her that it could have been Jesus. She was not looking for His victory.
4. It is possible that we look at the crises of our lives and we miss what God is doing because we only see gloom, despair, pain, and loss. We are not expecting God to do a miracle, and to raise that which was dead, and bring life to our loss.
5. Years ago, to make room for a new hydro-electric plant, a small town in Maine was slated to be flooded when the new dam was built. The people in the town were told many months in advance in order to give them time to arrange their relocation.
6. During those months, all work in the town ceased. No painting was done, no repairs were made on the buildings, roads, or sidewalks. With each day, the town got shabbier, dirtier, and uglier. Before the water ever hit the town, it looked abandoned and ruined. One resident in the town explained, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present."
7. When we face the situations of our lives without hope, and without faith that God can intervene and turn the situation for His glory, we set ourselves up to completely miss the presence of Jesus in our lives.
8. Notice not only that your Savior may be missed if you're not looking for His victory, but notice also further that your Savior may be missed:

B. If you're not listening for His voice

1. I love verse 16. It says, "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master." She did eventually recognize Him, after He called her name.
2. It is a beautiful moment, but the truth is, He had spoken to her already. In verse 15, He had asked her, "Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?"
3. Had Mary gone to the garden tomb, listening for His voice, perhaps she would have immediately recognized Him the moment He first spoke to her.
4. Mary reminds us that in all our situations of life, it is critical that we listen carefully for the voice of Jesus.
5. Ask yourself this, "What is the Lord Jesus trying to say to me through the crisis I am facing?" How can you answer that question if you are not listening?

6. Whenever you find yourself facing what appears to be a tragedy, open His Word, and look for Him. As you do, listen closely to what He says to you.

7. It may be that like Mary, somewhere in the quiet of your time alone, you will hear Him call your name, and speak into your life the very words you need to hear!

8. No matter how bleak and black your struggle may seem, no matter what tomb you may lie before you, don't every forget that:

Standing somewhere in the shadows, You'll find Jesus

1. The hymns of Fanny Crosby are one the treasures of the church. In her lifetime, Crosby gave to us over 8,000 songs. When Fanny was only 6 weeks old, she developed a minor eye inflammation. The doctor treating her was careless, and as a result of his malpractice, Fanny became completely and permanently blind.

2. Rather than being bitter at the doctor who had caused the loss of her sight, Crosby once said, "If I could meet him now, I would say, 'Thank you' over and over again." Fanny felt that her blindness was actually a blessing from God that enabled her to write the songs that she did.

3. There are times when we assume that what we are facing is a burden, when in actuality it is a blessing. Like Mary Magdalene, who wept outside the empty tomb, we need to be reminded that not everything is what it seems.

4. It could be that your sorrow is meaningless, your speculation is mistaken, and through all of your worry and despair, your Savior has been missed.

5. It could be that if you would just turn to Him, you would find that He is closer than you believed, and that He is doing a work in your life that is quite opposite of the tragedy you suspected.

ⁱ McHenry, Raymond, McHenry's Stories for the Soul, (Hendrickson Publishing, Peabody, MA, 2001), p. 306

ⁱⁱ Meyer, F.B., Gospel of John, (Oliphants, London, 1970), p. 361

ⁱⁱⁱ Hall, Newman, The Biblical Illustrator – Vol. 14 – St. John Vol. III, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids), p. 372