

Rising Sign

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[0 : 00] let's pray together as we open God's word. Lord Jesus, we believe and we know that you rose from the dead just three days after being, after dying.

And we know that that is the most glorious reality in the world. And we know that you appeared to Mary and we ask that you would, just as you did with Mary, enable us to hear your voice tonight by your spirit.

That we would believe you, turn to you, that we would walk with you. We ask this in your name. Amen. Well, this past week I received a phone call from an old friend and it was fantastic to hear from this person.

He lives a long ways away. None of you would know him. And as those sorts of conversations usually go, we've excitedly talked about how things had been since we last spoke.

He wanted to hear about our summer. I wanted to hear about his summer. And after we got through kind of the surfacy pleasantries, because we're old friends, he began to talk a little bit more personally.

[1 : 27] And he began to tell me how in this past summer, he's experienced a rather profound spiritual awakening in his life.

And it was wonderful to hear about it. He talked about how he, earlier this summer, he became aware that there were areas in his life that he had not yet given over to Jesus. He hadn't known about it previously.

It came to his attention. And he told me about how the Lord began coming in and transforming him in powerful ways. And as we spoke on the phone, I could hear his voice tighten, and he began to weep.

And he wept tears of joy and of freedom and of thanksgiving above all. And it was absolutely wonderful to hear.

There's nothing more glorious than to hear stories of how Jesus comes in and changes people's lives, and particularly with someone that I love so dearly. But when I hung up, and as I thought about the story that he had told, I began to realize that inasmuch as his story was amazing and beautiful and powerful, it wasn't all that uncommon.

[2 : 47] Over the course of the past 2,000 years, there's been a continuous stream, an unbroken succession of people in history whose lives have been transformed by the power of Jesus.

My friend's story is amazing, powerful, and wonderful, but it's not all that unique. It's happened in every year since Jesus rose from the dead.

And tonight, we're looking at the second reading in our service sheet. And we're going to look into the story of Mary Magdalene, and we're going to be able to peer into the story of the very first person whose life was transformed by the resurrected Christ.

And as we look into Mary's life, and as we look into Mary's story, we're going to see that her story, in so many ways, is a lot like our story. That the way Jesus transforms her life is the way Jesus transforms all of our lives.

And I want to look at how Jesus calls her, and how she hears his voice. And then I want to look at how Jesus commissions her to go out and announce the gospel.

[4 : 03] So first of all, the call that she receives. Now, a little bit of background, a little bit of context. We're looking at John chapter 20, and over the past summer, we've been looking at the seven signs in the book of John, the gospel of John.

And all of the signs point to Jesus. And in the resurrection, we've been looking, as we walk through the gospel, at the signs of Jesus. But when we get to the resurrection, we see, in a sense, the reality to which the signs point.

And John 20 is the story of Jesus' resurrection day. And it was a busy day. Jesus spends the whole day going from disciple to disciple, so to speak. Showing himself.

And in each time, we see the resurrection of Jesus from the perspective of different disciples. And in each case, the disciples' lives are radically transformed.

But before Jesus appears to any of the twelve, he appears to Mary Magdalene. And from the perspective of that culture, from the perspective of the world, Mary Magdalene would have been the very last candidate to be the first person to see the resurrected Lord.

[5 : 20] And that was quite simply, initially, because she was a woman. And the fact of the matter was, at that time, women were not treated equal with men, and particularly, their testimony was not viewed as being reliable.

Mary Magdalene's testimony would not have held up in a court of law. And yet, from the perspective of Jesus, when he looked at Mary Magdalene, he saw the perfect candidate.

Mary Magdalene had an extremely dark past. I don't know that you know much about Mary Magdalene. But of all the disciples, as far as we know, no other disciple experienced a darker past than Mary.

In the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 8, Luke tells us that seven demons had been driven out of Mary Magdalene by Jesus. Seven. Most of us can't comprehend the darkness of one demon, much less seven.

And perhaps because no other disciple had experienced such utter darkness, no other disciple had known a brighter inbreaking of Jesus' light than Mary Magdalene.

[6 : 36] During Jesus' ministry, it was Mary who had seen Jesus' light most clearly because she had seen darkness so starkly. And because she had seen Jesus' light so clearly, perhaps no other disciple had exhibited more devotion to Jesus than Mary Magdalene.

when nearly all of the other disciples had deserted Jesus, Mary stayed at the cross watching the horrific scene of his death.

Jesus had been the only light Mary had ever knew. Jesus had been her protector while he was physically with her. And so as Mary watched Jesus die, no other disciple experienced more horror at Jesus' death than Mary Magdalene.

Up until meeting Jesus, her life had been a hellish nightmare. And now with him dead, all the hope that she had received during the ministry of Jesus seemed as if it was going to evaporate like a cruel tease.

And so on Sunday morning, she was the first to go to the tomb and she wept. And she wept tears of utter hopelessness.

[8 : 00] And you can imagine the kind of thoughts that were going through her head from her perspective. Even though she went and she saw an empty tomb, she had no paradigm for resurrection.

To her, the empty tomb simply meant that Jesus' body had been taken away and defiled. I wonder if she wondered whether the darkness would return or whether the demons would come back.

But it was there in the thick blackness of her despair that Jesus saw the perfect candidate to be the first of all humanity to witness the greatness of his resurrected glory.

And the way she saw Jesus' resurrected glory was first by hearing. She saw first by hearing the call of Jesus.

Look at verse 14. Having spoken to the angels, Mary turned and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

[9 : 10] 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.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. All through the Gospels, you can see how Jesus was a master questioner.

He's always asking perceptive and brilliant questions. And here, when he comes up to Mary, he asks her a question. Mary, whom are you seeking?

And if it wasn't a horrifically pitiful scene, it would be comical. Obviously, Mary's looking for Jesus and there he stood.

And she was standing right in front of her, she lacked the ability to perceive him. She desired to seek after Jesus.

[10 : 21] At the moment, she was just seeking a dead body. But she was totally unable to seek Jesus effectively. She couldn't seek Jesus in a way that she would find Jesus.

but Jesus could seek her. And that's exactly what Jesus does. Jesus seeks Mary. Jesus brings new life to Mary by a single breath of his powerful word.

Mary. And she knew that voice. She could recognize the voice of Jesus when she couldn't recognize his appearance.

it was the voice that had cast the demons out. It was the voice that taught with such authority that it spoke right into her heart and created freedom.

It was the voice that had cried out on the cross, it is finished. And although perhaps she didn't understand it entirely yet, it was the same voice that had spoken the universe into existence.

[11 : 28] And it was the voice that was recreating her in that very moment. And ever since that day, the same voice of Jesus has been calling out to people in every year since that time, one by one, calling each of us by name to the eternal life of knowing God.

David opened the service by referring to sheep that can recognize a disguised shepherd. And Jesus says just that in John chapter 10, Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

You see, from the very beginning, people come to Jesus, people receive eternal life and are transformed when they hear Jesus call to them personally and when they respond in faith.

John Calvin wrote this, listen, it's worth it. In Mary Magdalene, we have an image of our own calling. For the only entrance to the true knowledge of Christ is when he first knows us and then intimately invites us to himself, not by the ordinary voice which sounds in everyone's ears indiscriminately, but by the voice with which he especially calls the sheep whom the Father has given him.

[13 : 04] Isaiah, prophesying about Jesus said in Isaiah 43, fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name and you are mine.

And down through the last 2,000 years, every life that has been transformed by Christ begins with Jesus' personal intimate invitation to come to himself.

But, if you've been following along and if you're thinking hard with me, you'll recognize a problem. I wonder if you have caught it.

There's a very good reason why Mary was able to hear the voice of Jesus. He was there. He was physically standing in front of her. She physically heard his voice.

But today things are a little different. Jesus is not physically present on earth. His voice is not physically heard anymore. And so the problem is, how are we to hear the voice of Jesus if we do not hear it physically?

[14 : 20] I'm glad you asked. I'm glad you identified the problem. Look at verse 17. Jesus said to her, do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my father.

Pause. Now, when Mary recognized Jesus' voice, she turned around and recognizing him, probably fell at his feet and embraced his legs.

And you can see why. She was enamored with his physical presence. All for the past three, probably about three years, the presence of Jesus had represented everything of light in her life.

And yet, Jesus says a strange thing to her. He says, don't cling to me. And it's odd, because just a moment before, he had addressed Mary in such an intimate and familiar way.

And now he says, don't cling to me. And the question is, why? But he gives the reason. Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

[15 : 28] Let me give you some background. It'll make sense in just a second. Just a few days before, on the night before Jesus had been handed over to death, he had spoken with his disciples almost all night long.

You can read about it in John chapter 16. And in that conversation, Jesus told his disciples that he was planning on ascending to the Father. Now, the disciples heard that and that didn't sound good to them.

And they're thinking, Jesus, you're the Messiah, we've been waiting a long time, you're here, we're glad you're here, we'd like you to stay and go out and deal with the Romans, preferably, if at all possible.

We don't want you to ascend to the Father just yet. But Jesus says, no, no, no, actually, it's a good thing that I'm ascending to the Father. When I ascend to the Father, I won't be with you physically,

but I will be with you spiritually.

When I ascend to the Father, Jesus said, I'm going to send the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will come and work inside you so that you can hear my voice, so that you can hear my word and respond in faith.

[16:43] And so back to the story with Mary. When Mary clings to Jesus' physical body, Jesus, in a sense, gently redirects her, as if to say, Mary, up until now, you have been comforted by my physical presence, but in just a few days, you will begin to enjoy my spiritual presence.

Now, that has big implications for you and I, and for how we hear the voice of Jesus, if we don't hear it physically. Jesus is not here physically.

Physically, he's at the Father's right hand. But he has sent his Spirit into the world, into our hearts, calling us, drawing us, convicting us of sin, and convincing us of grace.

And that is how, through the operation of the Spirit, that down through these 2,000 years, people in every generation have enjoyed just as close a relationship with Jesus as Mary enjoyed.

In fact, you might be able to say that we today can enjoy a closer relationship with Jesus than Mary could when she was embracing his feet. Because the Spirit of Jesus enters into our hearts and works on us from the inside out.

[18:06] Christ. The point is this. The same Jesus that spoke to Mary on that day is here calling to you and I, drawing us to himself.

And if you perceive in your heart that you are being drawn, attracted towards Jesus, friend, that is the Holy Spirit. Respond. Trust Jesus and, friend, he will change your life.

And some of us here tonight perhaps are aware of Jesus' call for the first time. And I would say, turn to Jesus.

Trust him. He's worth trusting. And he will take you to the most glorious places. Jesus calls Mary to himself, but this story is not just about Mary's call.

It's also about a commission. Jesus calls Mary so that she sees him through hearing, and then Jesus sends her out to announce the good news.

[19:16] And I want to look at her commission. Look at verse 17. Jesus said to her, Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my 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 that he had said these things to her. Jesus calls Mary to himself, but then he commissions her, and he commissions her with a gospel, with good news to announce to the other disciples.

I wonder if you can see the good news in those verses. Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my father and your father, my God and your God.

I wonder if you can see how high Jesus elevates the status of the disciples in saying just that. I wonder if you can hear the gospel, my father, your father, my God, your God.

You know that before Jesus came and died and rose again, that there was a great rift between God and humanity. Humanity had rebelled against God and because of that there was an irreparable rent of the relationship.

[20:45] But when Jesus came and died upon the cross, he purchased a restoration of relationship so that instead of being God's enemies, we're invited to become God's children.

So Jesus says to Mary, he sends Mary to the disciples and says, go tell the disciples that my father is now your father. My God is now your God.

In a sense, the good news that Mary was sent to proclaim was quite simply, guys, the adoption has gone through. The adoption is final and everyone who trusts Christ can become a child of God.

I wonder if you can see the good news in that. It's astonishing. And friends, that is the good news that is the content of Jesus' call to every one of us.

Every one of us, every one of us who is a Christian has at some point heard and understood that Jesus was inviting me to come and become a child of God.

[22:00] But look at the way she announces the gospel. Verse 18, Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and that he had said these things to her.

Jesus sends, here's the gospel, Mary, go announce it. Mary, I'm sure, runs to the disciples, bursts through the door, says, Peter, John, James, I've got good news, I've seen the Lord.

And then she began to say all the rest that Jesus had said. Mary goes in to the disciples and she tells them her story.

She gave a testimony. And if you look, once again, down through these long 2,000 years in which Jesus has been calling people to himself, in every generation, one of the key ways he does that is through the stories that believers tell of how they came to recognize the call of Jesus and how their lives were transformed.

See, Jesus has a habit of calling people to himself and then enrolling them as mouthpieces so that he can call other people to himself.

[23 : 21] The pattern repeats itself time and time again. One of the real privileges over the last month of being able to serve this congregation has been I've been able to hear some of your stories.

And friends, as I look out on this congregation, I can see people, and I won't name names, but I can see people and I've been blessed by the stories that you've told me about how God has come into your lives and changed you.

And I've seen, some of you who have not told me your stories, I've actually seen God changing you. And it's been a wonderful thing to behold. It's encouraged my heart.

And I think God would call our congregation to begin to become a congregation that is comfortable telling our stories.

It's comfortable giving God glory by sharing with one another what he's done. Because our stories, our testimonies, they're really not about us.

[24 : 34] They're just a chance to show forth God's glory. And that's why we're created. It makes a lot of sense. And I'd encourage you in your home groups, perhaps we'll find ways that we can do it in the service even, that we begin to share with one another the stories of how God has changed our lives.

And as we practice, we can begin to push the envelope a little bit and tell people outside this church about how God has changed our lives.

And friend, as we do that, we're going to become mouthpieces. we're going to become instruments of Jesus calling people to himself. And there's nothing better than that.

Like I said, it was a blessing to hear my friend tell his story about how Jesus had changed his life.

And part of the good news is that it's not that unique. Jesus is busy doing that right now.

He's calling us to himself and he's commissioning us. And I want to invite us to listen closely, to hear his voice, respond in faith, trust him, and tell your story.

[25 : 51] Let's pray. Let's pray. we'll see you next time. Let's pray.