

“Help, help! Somebody, help! They’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve laid Him!”

You can almost hear the panic in Mary Magdalene’s voice today. See the desperation in her eyes. You can just picture her arms waving frantically. I don’t know about you, but out of all the scenes in the gospels, this one really stirs up my emotions.

After all, this is faithful Mary Magdalene—when the disciples turned tail and ran away, she was the one to stick by her Lord’s side. Even when He was crucified, she was still there—can you imagine having to watch a close friend go through something like that? But yet, Mary stayed—she heard Christ’s seven last words; witnessed Him die an excruciating, agonizing death; she watched as the Roman soldiers took His corpse down off the cross. And now here she is this morning, coming to pay her final respects, maybe even seeking some closure, caring for her dear Lord’s body. As the Virgin Mary cradled Jesus as a baby, wrapping Him in swaddling clothes, here Mary Magdalene would take Him into her arms and wrap Him in burial cloths.

And so it breaks my heart to think of such a loyal disciple as Mary this way. Because when she arrives at the tomb, and sees that the stone’s been rolled away, she peeks in to discover that the body’s gone missing! In an instant, everything for Mary begins to fall apart. Her whole world comes crashing down around her. Life as she knows it gets unraveled. “Help! They’ve taken away my Lord,” she says, “and I don’t know where they’ve laid Him!”

This isn’t the first time that’s happened for Mary though. The Bible doesn’t tell us much about the one called Magdalene—really just a couple things. First, the gospels paint a picture of her unflinching devotion to her Lord, as we’ve already mentioned. And second, Luke chapter 8 and Mark 16 both tell us that at one time she had been afflicted by seven demons. Now just think about that—it’s scary to have just one demon taking you over, but Mary had not one, not two, not even three, but *seven* of them! Anyway, these things had come in and seized control of her—I’m guessing she was conscious of it the whole time, yet there was nothing she could do about it. So, if there was any other moment when things fell apart for Mary, when her world came crashing down, when life as she knew it was unravelling, it would’ve been then. I mean, *demons!* With that kind of affliction, feeling God’s total absence in the face of such darkness, how could Mary not be thinking, “Help! They’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where to find Him!”

So maybe for Mary, today at the tomb isn’t the only time she can’t find her Lord. But maybe also today, she’s not the only one either. Maybe there are some of you here this morning who’re having the same trouble finding your Lord. I’m guessing not many of have been possessed by seven demons before—I’m willing to bet not even just one—but when you think about it, is sin really much different? Doesn’t sin also has a way of taking you over, of clouding your judgment, making you do things no rational thinking person would ever do? I know when I look back on what I’ve done, I think to myself, *I don’t know what came over me! Nobody in their right mind would’ve done such a thing!* It’s like someone else was in control, like I was a different person, just not myself. And when everything’s falling apart as a result, when my world’s coming crashing down around me, when life as I know it is becoming unraveled . . . I know for me, God’s never felt so far away. When that happens, I find Mary’s words on my lips—“Help, they’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where to find Him!”

I would imagine we’re all like Mary Magdalene in one way or another—I mean who hasn’t known that kind of panicked, desperate, frantic search for God? After all, it’s been going on since the beginning of time. You’ll remember that in the beginning, it wasn’t long after God created the world that Adam and Eve were possessed by the devil’s lies. It seemed like, after all that God had graciously done for them—a home, a life, each other—they’d have to be out of their minds to give that up by breaking the one and only command God ever really gave them. But when they did, all of a sudden, it all came unglued. Even they themselves felt ruined—naked, ashamed, exposed. When God came to them later in the cool of the day, it still felt like He was miles apart now, there was a distance between them, they were no longer close—

instead Adam and Eve hid from Him in the bushes. Not knowing how to make it right again, they too must've thought, "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where to find Him."

It was just when Mary Magdalene, with seven demons on her back, was asking that very question, that she got a surprising answer. At first, when she turned around, it wasn't immediately clear—what she saw standing before her was just a regular, ordinary man. She didn't recognize who He was at first. But then all that changed with just one word. The gospels don't tell us the story of Mary's exorcism—they just say that at one point she had seven demons—but if it's anything like the other stories of Jesus casting out spirits, then we can piece it together. Can't you just hear Him standing over Mary, commanding those seven demons, "Get out!" While that's two words in English, it's only one word in Aramaic. And after hearing that one word—after the demons leave her alone—Mary now recognizes this average man as the Lord of her salvation. He had given her a new lease on life. And having found what she was looking for, how could she not follow Him?

Today, as she finds herself in a similar situation, a similar situation finds her. This morning at the tomb, as Mary's weeping over her Lord who's gone missing, she turns around. And what she sees standing before her is a man—again, nothing special, she thinks. John tells us she mistakes Him for the gardener—just a run-of-the-mill groundskeeper at the local cemetery. He notices her tear-stained cheeks, so He asks, "What's the matter?" And she tells Him, "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid Him! Sir, if you've taken Him, please tell me where He is" But once again, all it takes is just one word, "Mary," and she suddenly recognizes who she's talking to. This is Jesus! And if she's talking to her Lord right now, then there's no need for burial cloths anymore—He's broken the chains of death! He's back from the dead, alive and well, everything He ever said has come true! He died and rose for the salvation of the world!

My fellow Magdalenes, if we're having trouble finding God, like Mary we too might be surprised when God comes to find us. You see, it's no small thing that Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener. It might seem like a minor detail at first, but John includes this for a reason. A gardener plants, grows, brings about life—and that's exactly what Jesus is doing; it's just like the Garden of Eden. That's why John borrows the first words of Genesis to begin his gospel—"In the beginning" (John 1:1). It's his way of telling us that the arrival of Jesus is the arrival of the Creator, who's come back to get busy creating again. Later in John's gospel, in chapter 12, Jesus even says as much when He talks about Himself as a divine seed. Here's how He's creating anew—into an earthen tomb He'll be planted, but after a short while we'll see Him sprout up full of life and bearing the abundant fruit of salvation. When the risen Christ steps out of the tomb on Easter morning, it's a new creation that's also emerging.

It is that great Gardener, the risen Christ, that surprises us today. In just a few moments, as we're weeping in our hearts over our Lord's absence, you and I turn around to find Him at this altar. I know it might be hard to recognize Him at first—your eyes might tell you it's just plain ordinary bread and wine. But like Mary, as He calls you forward, maybe that'll be enough for you to recognize your Lord.

Because here in His true body and blood, the risen Christ stands before you in the flesh. Giving you His real presence, there's no more room for His absence. No, as you eat and drink, He plants Himself in you, and in your heart is sown a new creation. It shoots forth with grace and forgiveness, enough to drive out every last demon from within you. And as you bloom with eternal life, maybe you know now the kind of joy that Mary had.

Such excitement was more than Mary could keep to herself—if she bottled it up, she'd burst! So, running to the disciples, she just couldn't wait to tell them, "I have seen the Lord!" Being the first one to share the Gospel with them, Mary's become known as "the apostle to the apostles." It is her Easter story that the apostles took and continued to pass on to the world. In fact, John's still sharing it with you and me this morning. And as we encounter the risen Christ for ourselves, as His new creation again grows in us, I'm sure we're all glad Mary let the cat out of the bag. Just think what'll happen if we don't keep it a secret either!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! . . . He is risen indeed! Alleluia!