

Nine years ago this weekend the University of North Carolina Tar Heels' basketball team was in New Jersey getting ready to play in March Madness- the NCAA tournament. This was a significant moment for me because one of my closest friends, Jason, was there with the team, but not as a player- he was the Tar Heels mascot (Ramses). It made sense for Jason to dress up in a costume and lead people in cheers. Jason did everything big and loud, and we were both excited for the team to make a long run in the tourney. But something terrible happened that weekend, something I still can't fully believe or understand.

Jason left the team hotel to go pick up some snacks at a nearby gas station before the bus headed to the stadium, and on the way back a car hit him. It was devastating to hear the news. Jason was 21 years old, just months from getting his degree. We were supposed to be celebrating a tar heel victory together that day, but instead he lay in a hospital bed dying and I was on my knees asking God to save his life.

It was a national news story. Team mascot critically injured. We all hoped Jason would pull through but he didn't. The funeral was enormous. Thousands lined up at the viewing. Jennifer and I stood in line among them for over an hour before it was finally our turn to pass by. Surreal. Jason's body was there in the casket, but my friend was gone. (That's a sad story, I know. I'm sorry to start sad, but I promise not to end there.)

Before he died, Jason donated his organs. ESPN actually got word about it and did a special report about it they called: A Ray of Light. They told the whole story of Jason's loss and then they filmed Jason's parents meeting three of the organ recipients- three people who are alive today because of Jason. It was very moving. In a sense, Jason lives on inside of those individuals. And yet, that knowledge doesn't make up for the loss of my friend. His heart is still beating and his lungs are still drawing breath, but it's not Jason. Not anymore.

As much as we wish for it, the dead don't come back to life. And yet, the reason why we're here today is because of one man who did. A man died, he was buried, and three days later he rose to life. Believing that takes faith, doesn't it?

If you were to ask, "How does someone connect to the power and grace of God?" How do we link up with Him? My answer to you would be: faith. But what is faith? There are many ways to describe it, I suppose, but there's no better way to describe the faith that connects us to God than what we see in our text today when Mary Magdalene meets Jesus, her risen Lord. It's recorded for us here in Scripture, not just because it happened, but because it's instructive. It teaches us something. It shows us what faith is. This is what faith that connects to God looks like.

If you read any of the gospels all the way through, you'll find there's something very significant about the third day after Jesus death. All the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) Jesus keeps saying that he's going to rise after the third day.

In Luke 9:22, *"The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things," he said. "He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead."* In Luke 18:33, *"They will flog him with a whip and kill him, but on the third day he will rise again."*

Over and over again Jesus says, "I'm going to rise again on the third day." Now, it's the morning of third day after Jesus' death, and nobody is at the tomb. Peter and John aren't there. No one is there, except Mary and she's gone to pay last respects. But when she gets there, the tomb is empty. In spite of repeated statements that He would rise on the third day no one had any expectations that it would

happen. Mary is at the tomb on the third day, and it doesn't even occur to her that what Jesus had spoken to them about had come to pass. His followers couldn't have even believed Him 1%, or they would have at least been at the tomb out of curiosity. Mary's first thought isn't even, "I wonder...", it's "They stole the body!"

All these years later and if you asked the average person on the street what Easter is about they could probably tell you it's the day Christians celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If you asked them whether they believe it's true they would probably say, "Metaphorically speaking- yes, but I don't believe He literally rose from the dead." Most people are modern, rational folks, and scientifically speaking it's impossible for someone to rise from the dead. That's the reason most take this metaphorically and don't really take it seriously because the modern worldview doesn't allow for miracles.

You must understand that in the time of Jesus, among the Greeks and the Romans, people had an entirely different viewpoint. The Greeks believed that salvation was releasing the soul from the body. The body is bad and the soul is good- so salvation is the liberation of the soul from the body. For them the idea of a physical resurrection being a good thing or a saving thing was absolutely crazy.

The Jewish people thought very differently, and yet, 1st Century Jews- some of them believed (not all of them) that at the end of time God was going to renew the world. He would get rid of death and suffering. There would be a general renewal and there would be a resurrection and they would get new bodies. Some believed that. But here's one thing that the Jewish worldview in that day could not conceive of- they couldn't imagine a **human** being the Son of God. They couldn't imagine God becoming human. That would be ridiculous. And they would never imagine an individual, physical resurrection by one person right in the middle of history. It was inconceivable.

I want you to see that even though their worldview was different than ours, to them, the resurrection of Jesus (the bodily resurrection of the Son of God), was as unbelievable to them as it is to us today- just for different reasons. So when Jesus had repeated over and over again "On the third day..." they would have taken that phrase just as metaphorically as we do. It was so unbelievable to them, that even Jesus' closest followers weren't at the tomb that day, and when Mary saw the tomb empty it didn't even occur to her.

Do you know what this means? If there's anyone here who says, "I just can't believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead." There are a lot of people who feel that way, and I'm sure some of you here share that opinion. Let me do a little thought experiment with you. What would it take- what kind of overwhelming evidence would it take- to smash your worldview and bring you to be absolutely certain that Jesus rose from the dead? It would have to be overwhelming evidence, right? Incontrovertible. It would take incredible proof to smash that worldview and prove that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Well, I want you to see that whatever it would have taken to convince you- it must have hit them. Something as strong- something as overwhelming- must have happened to them. It must have! Because, for different reasons, they were every bit as skeptical as we are. So something must have happened to them that changed their minds. What was it? We know what it is, the gospel writers tell us. At least 11 times (there might have been more) Jesus appeared and hundreds of people believed in the risen Christ because they actually saw Him, heard Him, touched Him. Thousands more believed, because of the eyewitness testimony of their friends and neighbors. It overwhelmed them. It smashed their skepticism.

Why am I telling you all this? Faith rests in the truth. People say today, "If faith in Jesus changes you and works for you- if it helps you- then it's true for you." But you see, it's the other way around. Only if it's true- really true- will this change you and work for you and help you.

Listen, what do we need? All of the difficulty that we endure in this life, all the pain, all the hardship and suffering- how can you be absolutely sure that in the end God's going to make it all right? How can you know this- not just hope? How can we be sure that in spite of our own failures- our personal lapses in judgment- that God loves us and will never let us go. Never. How can we be sure? When you face death, how can you be sure that it's not the end?

Do you want to know how I can tell you the story of my friend Jason and not dissolve into a puddle of despair? It's because I don't believe death is the end. I miss my friend, of course I do. I grieve his loss to this day, but I don't believe we've parted for the last time. When you consider your own mortality, what gives you the ability to stare into that abyss without flinching?

Only if you know Jesus lives. Only if you know Jesus lives.

The only way you can be sure of these things and face life is if you know that Mary really saw Him that morning. Don't say, "Well, if it works for you then it's true for you." No. It only works if it's really true- if Jesus is alive. If that's true then we can face the hardships of this life- our own failures- even our own death. We can face anything.

The question is not whether the resurrection of Christ is exciting, or relevant, or whether it'll meet our needs- the question is whether or not it's true. If it is true, then it changes everything. Faith rests in the truth- that the resurrection of Jesus happened.

Faith also comes through grace. Grace. When you take a look at Mary's life you realize why her story is such a strong example for us. In some ways she's a spiritual seeker, isn't she? She's looking for Jesus. She won't go home. She's weeping and crying. She's going to take on the gardener. "I don't care if you took the body or not. Give Him to me!"

Mary was really seeking Jesus, but guess what, unless Jesus shows Himself, she's never going to find Him. You know why? She's hunting, and I've seen a lot of people like this, hunting for the wrong Jesus. She's looking for a Jesus that doesn't exist, because she doesn't know who Jesus really is- not really. If He just sits back and waits for her to figure it out He'll wait forever and she'll never find Him because she's got her blinders on. She is completely unaware of the Spiritual reality of Jesus. As loving as she is, as passionate as she is, as much as she wants to find Jesus- she is completely blind.

This is a cautionary tale. Right now, Mary believes she is in the midst of a disaster. There are angels in front of her, she can practically feel the Lord breathing behind her, and she still feels alone. She's about to be made one of the most famous people in the history of the world and she feels abandoned. When she actually meets the Lord, she thinks He's one of the enemy- "Where have you taken the body?!" She's passionate, she loves Jesus, and she's spiritually blind to the entire situation. She has no idea that God is working. She feels like He's abandoned her. It's the end of the world. But it wasn't.

I love the way that Jesus reveals Himself to her. He has to break into the story. He didn't just sit back and say, "Well, she's a spiritual seeker so: 'seek and you will find.' I'll just wait here in the corner until she figures it out." No. That's not how it works. It's not salvation by works. It's not salvation by our finding Him. It's salvation by Him finding us!

He comes to Mary with gentleness. "*Dear woman, why are you crying?*" Jesus asked her. It's a very tender moment. Then He asks, "*Who are you looking for?*" This has all the marks of an eyewitness account. I'm

sure for all the rest of Mary's life she must have thought about the double meaning in that question. "Who are you looking for?" Jesus knew she was there looking for Him, what He was trying to say was, "Mary, you love me but your understanding of me is way too small. You're not looking for the real me. You're looking for a version that you think exists, but doesn't."

So finally Jesus reveals Himself. It doesn't happen like this. "Teacher!" "Hi Mary." No. It's, "Mary." "Teacher!" He calls to her. He opens her eyes. Salvation is always by grace. What better way for Jesus to teach that His salvation is only by grace (not by our works- but by His works. Not by what we do- but what He did on the cross) than to choose Mary as His first missionary. Think about it. Peter was there. John was there. And Mary was there. They were all there together and Jesus was present too, but He didn't reveal Himself until it was just Mary. He was deliberate. Why?

Here's what I think. He chooses a woman not a man- and she wasn't even a pillar of the community she was viewed as an outcast. Jesus chooses her and how much clearer could He have communicated that His salvation is by grace and it's for everyone? It doesn't matter your pedigree. It doesn't matter your record. It doesn't matter your gender or your race. It doesn't matter! Jesus salvation is by absolute grace and therefore, Mary is His first ambassador.

He doesn't just choose people like Mary. Mary was not an insider by any standard. She was a woman not a man. She was an outcast. All that stuff. But then Jesus tells her, "Go find my... " Who? We expect Him to say, "Those miserable deserters. Those miserable deny-ers. You go tell them. I want to see them- day after tomorrow. They have one chance." No. "Go tell my BROTHERS." "Because of what I've done we're in the same family. Because of what I've done, my Father is their Father."

You have to remember, the disciples were haughty and Mary was humble. That's important. The disciples would argue about who was going to have the most important positions in Jesus' kingdom. Mary got down on her knees and washed Jesus' feet with her tears. And Jesus is not holding the disciples' pride against them. He's not self-righteous. Jesus is so unselfish in His love, and His calls to repentance, and His offer of grace.

That's still true today. Jesus' offer of salvation by grace is still an open invitation today. For us.