

# THE JESUS STORY

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Text: John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary 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.

**H**ere we are. We made it through Lent, with all those super long readings. We made it through Holy Week, with the cross bearing down on us. And now it's Easter, the tomb is empty, and Christ is risen. It's the same journey we make year after year. But why? What's the point of it all? Jesus' life and death and resurrection—what does it all mean?

The other week we wrapped up the class I was leading, and one of the clips we watched answered that question in a very simple but powerful way. It was a clip from a lecture given by John Shelby Spong, who was a Bishop in the

Episcopal Church. In it he boiled down what for him was the heart of the whole Jesus story.

He started out by saying Jesus was "the human face of what God looks like in human form." In more traditional language, Jesus was God "in the flesh." Which means that when we look at who Jesus was, we see who God is. When we look at how Jesus lived, we see God's nature enacted. When we look at how Jesus treated people, we see God's heart revealed.

Then he went on and said that one of the things we notice about Jesus, one of the things that stands out the most about him, was how he "loved wastefully." If love was money, Jesus was the world's biggest spendthrift. He loved

people even when they did him harm. He loved people even when there was zero chance of them ever loving him back. People rejected him, and he responded by loving them. People betrayed him, and he responded by loving them. People condemned him, and he responded by loving them. People denied him, and he responded by loving them. People abused him, and he responded by loving them. People abandoned him, and he responded by loving them. People killed him, and he responded by loving them.

And what that tells us is, if there was nothing anyone could do to make Jesus give up on loving them, then there's nothing we can do to make God give up on loving us. For Spong, that's what it all meant. That's what the Jesus story was all about: There's nothing we can ever do, and nothing we can ever be, that can put us outside the boundaries of God's love. God's love has no boundaries, no limits, no edges.

Even death is no barrier for God. That's what we see in the resurrection. God's love can reach us even inside a tomb—whether it's a tomb of stone, or a tomb of grief, or a tomb of bitterness, or a tomb of shame, or any other kind of tomb we can imagine. God's love can reach us even in the darkest of places, where there's no light, and no air, and no warmth, and no hope.

And that's why we make this journey year after year. That's why we sit through all those super long readings during Lent. That's why we bear the heaviness of the cross during Holy Week. Because today, on Easter, we hear that message louder than ever: There's nothing we can ever do, and nothing we can ever be, that can separate us from God's love.

But here's the thing. In the story, when Mary first sees Jesus, she mistakes him for someone else. She's unable to accept what her eyes are telling her. She's unable to open her mind wide enough. In the same way, I wonder if we're able to accept what our ears are telling us. I wonder if we're able to open our hearts wide enough.

Because it's one thing to accept that God loves us wastefully. It's another thing altogether to accept that God loves everybody that way—even people we don't think deserve it.

That's a tough one to swallow, and what we usually end up doing is drawing a big circle around God's love and deciding who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's not. And most of the time we don't even mean to do it. It just kind of happens.

Imagine a bunch of people sitting in that lecture hall listening to Spong, and afterwards they all go out for coffee and have their own conversation. One of them says, "I think it's great that God loves everybody, and there's nothing anybody can do to change that." Everyone nods in agreement. Yep, that's really great.

But then one person in the group says, "What about some evil dictator, some tyrant who kills millions of people? Surely God would draw the line with someone like that."

"Well, obviously there are some exceptions," the one who started out the conversation admits. "But for the most part, God loves everybody, and there's nothing anybody can do to change that." Everyone nods again and takes a sip of coffee.

Then a second person in the group says, "What about someone who's evil, but not quite that evil—like maybe a seven out of ten on the evil scale?"

"I don't know," someone says. "That's still pretty bad. I can't imagine God loving even a seven out of ten." So they all agree that God loves everybody, and there's nothing anybody can do to change that—up to a certain point. Then they all go get another cup of coffee and come back to the table and start talking about something else.

But they don't get too far before a third person in the group says, "Well, what about someone who's maybe not evil, but they're still kind of shady—like you definitely wouldn't want to have them over for dinner?" And so on goes the conversation until they've kicked pretty much everyone out of the circle and turned God's love into something exclusive—

something that's out of reach for all but a few rather than something that fills every single human life to overflowing.

Now, obviously people don't actually sit around having conversations like that. But the point is, this is something human beings do, consciously or unconsciously. We circumscribe God's love. We build walls and fences around it. We bring it down to our size. Because we don't know what to do with a love that doesn't know when to quit, a love that doesn't believe in lost causes, a love that never writes anyone off, even the worst of us, even a ten out of ten on the evil scale.

We don't know what to do with a love like that any more than Mary knows what to do with a risen Jesus. She thinks he's the gardener. She turns this moment of wonder into something prosaic in order to wrap her mind around it. And it's only when Jesus calls her by name, when he makes a personal connection with her, that she finally recognizes him.

So maybe that's what we need, too.

We turn God's love into something prosaic—something small and limited and human—in order to wrap our minds around it. And maybe what we need is to make a personal connection with the story. And I don't just mean the story of the empty tomb. I mean the whole Jesus story. Maybe what we need is for Jesus' life and death and resurrection to really speak to us. Maybe what we need is to look at the human face of what God looks like in human form and know that he's looking back at us, not with judgment, but with understanding and compassion and acceptance.

I think then we might stop worrying about who else God loves and whether or not they meet our standards. I think then we might learn to love wastefully. I think then we might finally be at peace—with God, with ourselves, and with one another.

Amen, and happy Easter.