

I'm sure in some ways all of us can relate to the fact that sometimes life has a way of killing our dreams. We set out with high hopes—for our education, our career, our family, and even our golden years. We have plans, aspirations, and expectations. But things don't always turn out the way we expected. Plans fall through. People let us down. We let ourselves down. Suddenly the life we're living isn't the life we dreamed of, and we find ourselves in a place we never expected to be.

In the musical version of *Les Misérables*, a young woman named Fantine sings a powerful song as she finds herself in a hopeless place. She's been left alone with her child, Cosette. She finds work in a factory but has to put Cosette in the keeping of some cruel innkeepers. When it's discovered Cosette was born out of wedlock, they throw Fantine out of the factory and into the streets. She's forced to sell her hair, then her teeth, and then her body, in order to pay for Cosette's care. She's falsely accused of a crime and placed under arrest. And on top of all this, she's seriously ill. Out of that dark place, she sings,

*I dreamed a dream in days gone by,  
When hope was high and life worth living...  
now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

In one way or another, we've all been there. Right now you may be thinking, "Well, gee, Happy Easter to you too. Thanks for cheering me up, Mark." Isn't Easter supposed to all about the brightness of spring, bunnies and chicks, a new day, new clothes, and a new lease on life?

But our Easter story today begins where many of our stories take us, and that's in a dark place; a place where hope has died; where dreams have died. Today I want us to look at the story of a woman named Mary; not the Mary we know as the mother of Jesus, but a different Mary, the one we know as Mary Magdalene.

### **Who is Mary Magdalene?**

What do we know about this Mary? She's called "Magdala" because she's from the Galilean town of the same name. Down through the years, Mary's reputation has been stained by folklore. A tradition dating back to the 8th century identifies her as the prostitute in the Gospel of Luke, who anointed Jesus with her tears, but there's nothing in Scripture to support that idea. The rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, portrays her as a sensuous woman torn in her relationship with Jesus between religious devotion and romantic attraction. According to the popular novel

of a few years ago, *The DaVinci Code*, Mary became the wife of Jesus, the mother of his child, and the leader of the church after his death.

But what does the record really say about Mary? The Bible simply says at one time she was possessed by seven demons. That's quite a load to carry! We don't know what that looked like in Mary's case, but we know from other accounts demons could cause a person to cut themselves, throw themselves into a fire, and lose control of their bodies. Often, people like this were locked up or forced to live on the streets. Whatever her past was, Jesus delivered her from it as he did with so many others. He set her free from those dark forces, and she found life again; a life centered on Jesus. After that, Mary became a committed follower of Jesus. She was one of the women who provided for Jesus out of her own private funds, so she might have been a woman of some means. She was one of those devoted women with him at the cross. When almost all the other disciples fled, Mary was there with her Lord. She's a prime example of a life turned around by Jesus.

### **Mary visits the tomb in grief**

And so, we're not surprised in John's gospel to see her coming to Jesus' grave early Sunday morning with a few other women while it was still dark. Jewish custom said loved ones should mourn at the tomb for at least three days. Mary came to mourn, not out of obligation, but out of love. For Mary, hope had died, but love had **not** died.

But, when she got there she was shocked to find the stone already rolled away and the tomb empty. Her grief welled up into outrage and she **ran** full speed ahead back to town to tell the disciples someone had stolen the body! When Peter and John got the news, they ran to the tomb, but Mary walked there, arriving there after Peter and John had left. She could not stop crying. It's like, this was the last indignity—someone stole the body of her Master!

### **Mary encounters two angels**

We pick up the story in John 20:11-12.

**Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.**

Mary stooped and looked into the tomb and saw two angels. It's interesting, Jesus was crucified between two thieves, but

here it appears he was buried between two angels! It seems that through her tears Mary didn't recognize them as angels. They asked her, "*Woman, why are you crying?*" (verse 13a) I'm sorry, but angels or no angels, what a stupid question! Why wouldn't she be crying? Jesus was gone. "*They have taken my Lord away,*" she said, "*and I don't know where they have put him*" (verse 13b).

Notice how she referred to him. She doesn't say, "They have taken *his body* away." But rather, "They have taken *my Lord* away." This was personal to her. He was everything to her. He was her purpose for living. After years of darkness and torment, she'd begun to dream of good things again. But cruelty and death in the form of a cross had killed that dream. What now? Would the demons that once haunted her return? What kind of future did she have without Jesus? She might as well have said, "They have taken *my hope* away, and I don't know where they have put it."

### Hope Needs A Reason

What is hope, after all? Is it just wishful thinking? Like, "I hope we have good weather this week?" Is it blind optimism? Is it like what the little boy said, "Hope is wishing for something you know ain't gonna happen?" The dictionary defines hope as, "a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen."

One thing proven over and over again is without hope our spirit dies. In a powerful article titled "*Dying of Despair*," psychiatrist Aaron Kheriaty, a professor at UC Irvine, observed the startling rise in deaths from suicide and drug overdoses, particularly among high school students. He pointed to a number of long-term studies that have analyzed the difference between high-risk patients who survive and those who die by suicide. Here's his conclusion of this research: "Over a ten-year span, it turns out the one factor most strongly predictive of suicide isn't how sick the person is, nor how many symptoms he exhibits, nor how much physical pain he's suffering, nor whether he's rich or poor. The most dangerous factor is a person's sense of hopelessness. The man without hope is the likeliest candidate for suicide. We cannot live without hope."

But hope must have a reason. It must have something solid to stand on. It's like the Loyola of Chicago basketball team. No one gave them any hope of surviving March Madness, but they made it to the Final Four. What's the foundation of their hope? A 98-year-old nun named Sister Jean who serves as their chaplain. I don't know if Sister Jean has anything at all to do with Loyola's run, but I do know this, hope needs a reason. Something, or someone, that can change the trajectory. Without a reason, hope is just wishful thinking.

Perhaps Mary should have had a reason to hope. After all, Jesus had predicted not just his death but also his resurrection. And she had the proof of an empty tomb, which was enough for the apostle John. Earlier, we're told when John went inside the empty tomb "*He saw and believed*" (verse 8). But that was not

the case with Mary. She saw Jesus die. She saw him laid to rest. As far as Mary is concerned, it's over. The empty tomb didn't point to a resurrection. So she did what we all do at a fresh grave. She wept—because there was nothing else to do.

### Hope Needs Time to Process and Go Down Dead Ends

But then something caught her attention. John said.

**At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.**

**He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" (verses 14–15)**

She turned around. We don't know why, perhaps she just sensed someone behind her. The man didn't look familiar to her. Of course, the morning light was dim, and tears still filled her eyes. She thought perhaps he was the gardener. Whoever this was, he didn't look like much because gardeners were at the bottom of the social scale. And he asked the same dumb question the other two had asked, "*Why are you crying?*" But then he added another dumb question, "*Who are you looking for?*"

Now, of course, we all know who this is—it's Jesus! And perhaps she should have known as soon as he started asking questions. You see, Jesus loved to ask questions. And in this particular instance, it's exactly what Mary needed. People who are hurting and grieving need someone to meet them where they're at and listen to them. I mean as soon as Mary turned around, Jesus could have said to her, "Ta Da! It's me—Jesus!" Or he could have said, "Stop crying. Everything happens for a reason. He's in a better place." And he certainly didn't scold her for lack of faith. He met her where she was at. He asked her to tell him about it, and he listened as she explained. Have you ever noticed how grieving people need to tell you what happened—over and over? Mary did the same thing.

But notice she also asked him a question. She had a plan to fix the situation at hand. "Tell me where you've put him and I'll go get him." She couldn't bring him back to life, but she could at least get his body and give it the respect and care it deserved. Sometimes in our loss of hope, we try to find something to latch onto, something to **do**. We want to control the narrative. I've seen men and women in the midst of grief submerge themselves in details of planning a memorial service and dealing with the estate. They kind of push aside the grief, but it always comes back. Our "to-do lists" may divert our attention for a while but they can't heal the wound in our soul and restore hope.

### Hope Comes From A Personal Encounter With Jesus

Only one thing can restore hope.

**Jesus said to her, "Mary."**

**She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). (verse 16)**

It's like as soon as he speaks her name, "Mary," hope was awakened in her. One word remade her world and transformed her

life. And the word was her own name! It's a reminder that we're a flock, not a herd, and Jesus knows our name; he sees us. Right here in John's gospel, he said, *"I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name and they follow"* (John 10:27). At that moment, Mary heard him call her name, and that was all it took. And her reply was just as personal, "Rabboni." It's a term of affectionate respect. It really means something more than teacher. It means *my* teacher. Faith had died, hope had evaporated, but now it all gathered again around her risen Lord.

Suddenly, she has a reason to believe. It wasn't enough for Mary simply to see the empty tomb or hear someone else's testimony about the risen Christ. She needed something more personal than that. She needed a real encounter with Jesus. Someone has written about this story, "This is a memorable confirmation of our Lord's personal dealings with his people."

Perhaps it's no coincidence this all takes place in a garden with even the mention of a gardener. And not just a garden, but a garden filled with spices for burial. A garden is a beautiful thing. In the Song of Solomon, the man said to his lover, *"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk"* (Song of Songs 5:1). Christians through the ages have always seen this as not just an intimate picture of two people in love, but also a picture of the love between Jesus and his bride, the church. Without a doubt, something personal and even intimate is happening here between Jesus and Mary. It's a reminder we sometimes need more than evidence—we need something personal. We need to hear him call our name. We need to meet him in the garden. We need to hear him say to us, *"Come to me..."*

### **Hope is Seeing the Story from a New Perspective**

But Mary still didn't quite get it. Apparently, when she realized it was Jesus, she grabbed hold of him, as if to never let go. Look what happened next.

**Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (verse 17)**

Understandably, Mary wanted to cling to Jesus body. She was thinking, "Now that he's alive and I have him in my grasp, I'll never let go of him again. He's my only hope. I lost him once but I won't let it happen again."

But Jesus firmly and gently resisted. *"Do not hold on to me."* Why? "Because the story is changing. Your story is changing. Up until now, you've only known me by my physical presence. But from now on it will be different. You see, I'm ascending to my Father. And you'll have a new kind of relationship with me and with my Father. It will be a relationship mediated by the Holy

Spirit. It will be a new kind of intimacy; a spiritual intimacy; one that you'll share with my Father and your Father, and with your fellow brothers and sisters."

Sometimes we think we know what must happen for us to have hope again. We insist things have to be a certain way. We want to control the narrative. Up until now, Mary couldn't conceive of anything different from what she knew. But Jesus forces her, and us, to be open to new ways of finding hope. Like Mary, hope is found when we see the story from a different perspective, and it's not only good, it's better. Jesus had already told his disciples, *"It is for your good that I'm going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I'll send him to you"* (John 16:7). And just 40 days later, Jesus ascended to heaven, and that Advocate, the Spirit of Jesus, was sent to Mary and the others as they waited—a new kind of relationship and a new way of hoping.

With that, Jesus sent her off to tell her brothers about this new relationship. He still had work for her to do—a message to share—more life-changing, more earth-shaking than she ever imagined. "Go and tell," he said. "Tell my brothers, tell the world: Death is defeated. I'm risen!" And that's what she did.

**Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. (verse 18)**

And so, Mary, this woman once tormented by seven demons, became the first one to preach the resurrection. Not only did she find hope, but she found purpose—Go and tell! Her message was simply, *"I have seen the Lord!"* She didn't need a seminary degree to say that!

You see, hope is not a what, or a when, or a why. Hope is a "who." Hope has a name. His name is Jesus. Hope has to have a reason, and he's the reason for our hope. It's not wishful thinking. It's not blind optimism. It's based on the rock solid historical fact of the empty tomb. His resurrection proves he's stronger than any setback, any failure, any loss, and any demon that comes at night. Best of all, he's stronger than death. If life has a way of killing dreams, only Jesus can bring them back to life.

And hope comes when you hear him call your name: Mary, John, Joyce, Michael. What does God say to people like you and me who long for hope? He calls us by name. Hope has a name and that hope calls you by name. You may be in a graveyard like Mary was, but he sees you, and he knows you. And he can open your eyes to see that it is Him standing in the midst of your story.

That's not to say we always get what we want, or that every bad thing can be undone in this life. It doesn't work that way. Mary didn't get exactly what she wanted. Jesus wasn't going to be with her the way he'd been. But he was going to be with her in ways she'd never dreamed possible. There was still a lot she didn't understand. There's a lot we don't understand. Mary didn't know exactly

what the future held, and neither do we. So we have to fight the temptation to try to control the narrative; to wave a magic wand to put things back the way that they were. In those moments, will you choose to see your story from a different angle?

In the end, we can have the confidence to know Jesus is bigger than anything that kills our dreams. And that's what hope is. Hope is the confidence that God is good, and God is for us, and he's present in the midst of the darkest parts of our story. Whatever you're dealing with today, whatever pain, loss, or disappointment you're walking through; God can do something good with it. That doesn't minimize the pain, the loss or the evil of it. It just means the story isn't over yet. God can meet you in that place, just as he met Mary in her dark place. He's strong enough, wise enough, and loving enough to do something good, meaningful, and eternally significant. Hope isn't wishful thinking. It's confident living. It's facing the future knowing God can and will do something good, in this life, and the life to come.

We left poor Fantine dying in the street. Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* to expose what he called the three great evils of his

time—poverty, the exploitation of women and children, and spiritual darkness. Fantine ends up dying of her illness. Jean Valjean takes Cosette into his protection, raises her, and years later sees her marry a fine young man. As Valjean dies at the end of a long and good life, Fantine's spirit returns to usher him into heaven. The musical ends in a great reunion of Fantine and Valjean, with Fantine singing to him,

*Come with me,  
where chains will never bind you,  
all your grief at last behind you.*

It's a song of hope.

If you should find yourself in a dark place right now, in a graveyard like Mary was, have the courage and honesty to hear his very personal call to you, "*Come to me...*" Life has a way of killing dreams, but Jesus has a way of bringing them back, and us back—back to life!

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*