

Preached by: Rev Christopher Johnson

April 9th at Nazareth Lutheran Church, Woolloongabba

Matthew 28:1-10

¹ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Now I have told you.'

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Mary begins as a mess. "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" as it says in Luke 8:2. There are five Marys in the New Testament, which is why this one is identified with "Magdalene." Magdalene isn't her last name. Magdalene refers to her hometown—a little fishing village on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee called Magdala.

Luke tells us that Mary had been demon possessed—with seven demons, the biblical number for completion - a complete set. Can you imagine being that messed up? I'm pretty sure we all could to some extent. Covid and lockdowns in the last few years have given so many people the opportunity to reflect on themselves...and on the state of the world. And we didn't come up with happy answers. Many hit rock bottom in this time. Internalizing everything. Who is

there to talk to about being so far down? Who would listen? Sounds a lot like having at least seven demons to me.

Mary was down, but her Messiah had lifted her up! Jesus lifted Mary up from her pit of seven demons. From the deep darkness of depression, from the feelings of endless suffering. From dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death Mary has been rescued.

And Mary rises up! She begins to follow Jesus. We know that path well, because we walk it, even now! And it's not always an easy path. Just like Mary, our life isn't always smooth sailing. Being a Christian – following in the footsteps of our Lord – this sadly doesn't mean that we will never sin again. Or even that we might be showered with blessings here on earth. On the contrary, following Jesus is rarely easy.

On Friday we hear that Mary and the other women were at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus slowly suffocate to death. Where there was once great joy at being released from those seven demons, now Mary watches her Messiah - her saviour – bleed and die.

Mary's Messiah is your Messiah too. His face is caked with spit and blood. His throat is so dry He can't swallow. His voice is so hoarse He can scarcely speak. To find the last time moisture touched His lips, we need to rewind the clock twelve hours to the meal in the Upper Room. Since drinking from the Passover cup, Jesus has been betrayed, condemned, mocked, beaten, and crucified. No liquid has quenched His thirst. He lets out a cry and gives up his spirit.

That's how things stand just before dawn on Sunday. There had been so much hope, so much promise. But now, it had all come to what? Nothing! *Nothing!* The famous Rabbi? Dead. His disciples? In hiding behind locked doors. Other followers? Scattered. One—Judas Iscariot—has even killed himself.

But if that was how the story ended then we would not be here today. If that was where Mary's witness concluded there would be no rejoicing today, no public holiday on Monday...no eternal promise.

The story of Holy week continues as two Mary's rise up early Sunday morning. These are the other Mary (Mary, the mother of James and Joseph from the previous chapter of Matthew) and Mary Magdalene. Having watched the crucifixion together, they now get up early on Sunday to anoint Christ's dead body. But they don't find Christ's body. They find the guards that had been posted because the Jews suspected that Jesus' followers might steal away his body and falsely claim a resurrection...and those guards appear to be almost dead themselves! You could only tell they were alive because they were shaking in fear.

And the women find an empty tomb. A stone slab rolled away. And they find an angel of the Lord, with bright white clothing and even brighter skin...so bright that they hardly could look at him. We know from the other Gospels that Mary broke out in despair at first. Christ is missing! The guards didn't do their job! Maybe the Jews stole away Christ's body themselves! Heaven only knows.

And heaven does know. The angel knows exactly why Mary has come. And in his message we hear again those blessed words that we hear whenever anyone appears from God, visibly bearing his power and authority and majesty:

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’”

I could rest forever in those words: Do not be afraid. This is consistently God's message to his people. It's the message of Easter. And this message comes to Mary twice. Despite the beautiful words “do not be afraid”, Mary rushes from the tomb still a little bit afraid, and even so she's filled with joy at the words she just heard. She's going to proclaim the message to the disciples just as the angel instructed her to do...

But first...she meets her Lord. There, right in front of her is the man – the God – who she saw die such a short time ago. Both Mary's rush to him. Their joy is full to bursting. They fall to the feet of their Lord and worship him. There's probably a fair bit of fear still within them as they hear once again those blessed words: “Do not be afraid.”

Jesus likewise tells Mary to go tell of these events to those that once were his disciples and now are his brothers – for indeed all who have been baptised into Christ are siblings and co-heirs of his glory.

The Gospel writer John tells us this version of Mary going to the disciples:

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.’” 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.

This is the witness which we remember from Mary Magdalene – the one who had seven demons driven out of her! Mary is the first to see our risen Lord Jesus. She is the first witness to the resurrection. Mary is the one tasked with taking the good news of this gospel to Jesus’s disciples and this message that she gives them lives on today in our Creeds.

And the wording of her confession is important too. Mary saw the angel. She saw the resurrection. There was no doubt what had happened in her mind. “I have seen the Lord.” And Lord isn’t just some polite honorific like ‘Sir’ or ‘Mister’ or the like. Mary is saying “I have seen God, the King of the universe.” “I have seen the one through whom all things were made.” “I have seen the one who is coming again, riding on the clouds, as King of kings and Lord of lords!” We’ll hear the same confession next week from Thomas: “My Lord and my *God!*”

But what’s all this mean for us? It means that we, alongside Mary, no longer have any reason to fear. Our Lord has risen from the grave! And so too shall we. Yes, even though we may find ourselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death, even though we might be attacked by seven demons, even though we might see nothing ahead of us but death and taxes...we know that Jesus has conquered the grave. He has destroyed the powers of sin, death and the Devil. God has done this for us, that even though we die we may yet live with him in paradise. This is our sure and certain hope.

And so, I invite you to proclaim once more with Mary the good news of the Gospel.

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed.*

Amen.