

YOU CAN BELIEVE IT! JOHN 20

Several years ago an eleven year old girl, a dear friend of ours, gave me a copy of a letter that she had written to her father. Her father and mother had separated when she was an infant and there was much hostility between them. Consequently, the girl had only seen him once, in a chance encounter, when she was six years old. But in the letter it was apparent that even though she didn't really know him, even though he had never made any attempt to know her or *be* with her, even though she had only seen him one time, he meant the world to her.

For she concluded the letter with these words: *"I miss you so much. I love you more than anything. When I think about you my heart pours out in a beautiful and emotional way. Sometimes I write songs about you. I can't imagine how someone could love a living thing any more than I love you. I named a star after you, that's how much I love you, enough to make you a star in the sky; enough to make a song about you, enough to write a book about you. I love you that much!"*

When I read those words I wept. I wept because it sounded just like something my daughter would have written to me. I wept because she didn't have a relationship with her daddy like my daughter had with me—she didn't have a relationship at all. And I wept because I knew some things about her dad that she *didn't* know. He actually didn't give a rip about her. He had told her mother that he didn't want to have anything to do with her, and didn't care if he ever saw her again.

And so what he thought about that precious love letter she sent to him, and what he did with that letter is something she may never know. Because seven years later, she still has had no response.

Let me ask you something: Why do you think this little girl penned those heartfelt sentiments about her dad? Why do you think she had such a high opinion of him?

I should tell you, she's an exceptionally bright young lady. She *knew* he was absent. She *knew* that if he really wanted to be with her, he would have come around. She knew, deep down, that he actually couldn't have cared less about her. But she desperately wanted to *believe* that he did. She craved the attention and affection and sense of security that only a father can give, and she wanted it so badly that she actually created her own reality. She fashioned, in her own imagination, a father that had all the qualities she longed for.

But, of course, that fantasy didn't last. It *couldn't* last. Not with the pressures and pitfalls and precariousness of adolescence.

That girl is now eighteen. On Monday, Mindy and I visited her in a Portland hospital after her mother called saying that she had attempted to kill herself by taking a handful of pills. This was because her boyfriend had just dumped her for another girl.

We were there when she came out of ICU, and as we walked into the room and looked into her swollen eyes it was hard not to stare at her arms. Both of them were covered, from her wrist all the way past her elbow, with dozens of scars and scabs from cutting herself. The first words out of her mouth were, "I wish I had succeeded." A little later she informed us that this was the sixth time in the last two years that she has tried to commit suicide, and she has spent nearly half of that time in a mental hospital.

Hopelessness, helplessness, despair. Desperate for authentic, unconditional love. Desperate for someone she can hold onto who will never leave her or forsake her. Desperate for someone who will hold onto her, and never let go.

There are countless people in the world who are just like this broken girl. There always have been, including in Jesus' day. What is interesting is that Jesus was drawn to these kinds of people because He knew what they needed, and He knew that He could provide what they needed. There was the woman in Samaria that Jesus encountered at a well where the townsfolk came to draw water. But there were no other people there besides her, for she was shunned by her village because she defied the laws of God and was openly living in immorality. In her conversation with Jesus she tried to come across as respectable, but Jesus knew her heart. He knew her past. He could see her brokenness. So He offered to give her *living water*, to satisfy her *real* thirst—her thirst for authentic, unconditional love.

There was Mary Magdalene. When Jesus met her she was writhing on the ground and foaming at the mouth, because she was possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2). But Jesus could see right through her distorted facial features and her flailing body. He knew *her* story as well. He knew all about the hurts and traumas that Satan had exploited to gain the upper hand in her life. He knew how utterly broken and helpless she was. So calmly...authoritatively...He commanded the demons to leave, then reached out His hand and helped her to her feet. When He did her empty soul was filled to overflowing with His authentic, unconditional love. She became a loyal follower. She even followed Him to the foot of the cross during His crucifixion (John 19:25).

But what is most interesting to me about Mary Magdalene is the story that is recorded about her in John 20. Let me set the context for you before we read it. It was very early, before dawn, on Sunday morning, three days after Jesus had died on the cross. It had been another fitful night for the former followers of Jesus, for they were utterly devastated by His death. Not only were their emotions swirling, but there had even been an earthquake during the night, no doubt intensifying the despair they were already feeling.

We read in **verses 1-16a**.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ *Jesus said to her, “Mary.”*

There are no coincidences or chance encounters in the Bible. There is a reason that the main character in John’s account of the resurrection is Mary Magdalene, not Mary the mother of Jesus, not Peter or John or any of the twelve disciples. There is a reason that Mary Magdalene was the very first person on earth to witness the *risen* Lord. But it *is* surprising, from a human perspective. Mary, of course, was a woman, and women in this day and age did not have the same status as men. What is more, she certainly wasn’t a VIP. She was a “nobody,” from a human perspective. Remember, before she encountered Jesus in Galilee she was avoided like the Plague.

Why is Mary Magdalene center stage in the Resurrection story? Without minimizing the trauma and devastation of any of the other followers of Jesus after He died, I would suggest to you that Mary had more to lose than any of them. Think about what she was before she met Jesus. Her body had been inhabited by seven powerful demons, who would often take possession of her faculties and throw her into involuntary, uncontrollable fits of insanity. With Jesus gone, what was to prevent these demons from coming back with a vengeance and wreaking havoc in her life? With Jesus gone who was there to save and protect her?

I can just imagine what must have been going through her mind on her way to the tomb early Sunday morning. I wonder if she felt kind of like our eleven year old friend who so desperately wanted to believe that her daddy was kind and loving and caring, that she created a fantasy of him. Was Mary wondering if she had created an imaginary Savior in her mind, and attributing to him all the qualities of the Messiah? Was it just wishful thinking? Was it just a fantasy?

I can imagine the hopelessness, helplessness, and despair creeping in. I can imagine her thinking about her uncertain and perilous future and wondering if she would be able to cope.

So while she went tentatively to the tomb to grieve and to wonder, Jesus was eagerly waiting for her. And He even waited to reveal Himself to her until after His two disciples left, so that He could give *her* His undivided attention.

Why? His love and compassion for her was so great that He wanted her to know, personally, that He really was the Messiah, the Son of God. He saw her pain and panic and wanted to reassure her, as soon as possible, that He was alive and that all was well, and all would be well. He wanted her to know that His resurrection proved that nothing could stop Him from being her Savior—not just her Savior on the day He delivered her from demons, but her Savior on each and every day from now on. Jesus was alive. And Mary could be assured that she still belonged to Him, she could still put her hope in Him, she could still count on His protection, and she could be assured that He would never leave her or forsake her.

But that’s not only true for Mary. It’s true for all of those who believe in Jesus. His resurrection changes everything. You will hear about it from one of our members in a few minutes. And then I’ll tell you how it can change you, too.

PART 2 “YOU CAN BELIEVE IT!”

In the story we read earlier in John 20, you might have noticed that when Mary Magdalene discovered that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb, she began a frantic

search in order to find it and put it back in its place. She was thinking to herself, “I can’t let His body be vandalized! I can’t let wild animals rip it apart! I’ve got to find the body to preserve it! That’s the least I can do for this one who helped me so much!”

Her preoccupation with finding Jesus’ body suggests that she thought Jesus’ death was the end of Him. After all, death is final. It is irreversible. What possible alternative could there be?

Which is the reason she could not recognize Jesus when he stood before her. She thought He was the gardener—one who might be responsible for taking Jesus’ body out of the tomb.

But imagine her astonishment and her joy when she realized it was Him! Her Savior! Her Friend! Her Lord! She was so beside herself with joy that she cried out, “Rabboni” which means Teacher, and then clung to Him until Jesus had to tell her to let go.

Do you know why? Because what she had previously believed about Jesus proved to be undeniably true. He *is* the Messiah, Son of the living God. He really does have the power over Satan and the forces of evil! He really can forgive sin and relieve guilt! He really is the King of kings and Lord of lords!

But these truths have implications for more than just Mary Magdalene. He *is* God’s provision for *our* deepest needs. He’s God’s provision for the guilt and shame we carry because of *our* wrongdoing, because He paid the price for our guilt and shame on the cross so that we could be forgiven and relieved of it.

Jesus is God’s provision for our loneliness and our longing for authentic, unconditional love, because He’s proven by His life and death that there’s nothing He wouldn’t do for us.

Jesus is God’s provision for our hopelessness and helplessness, because Jesus defeated the powers of sin and Satan on the cross.

Jesus is God’s provision for our brokenness and our hurts. He can restore the mess that either we or someone else has made of our lives, for He is in the business of taking broken pieces and not just putting them back together, but making them into something beautiful.

Jesus is God’s provision to release us from bondage to the things that keep tripping us up and causing us to fall on our faces.

Jesus is God’s provision for us to live as He created us to live—in peace and freedom and joy—a deep, abiding joy that comes from knowing Him and experiencing His love.

Jesus is God’s provision for our eternal life, because He delivered a fatal blow to our ultimate enemy, death, when He rose from the dead.

The question is: Do *you* know this Jesus? Have *you* received Him? Receiving Him simply means that you believe that He is who He said He was, Messiah, Son of the living God. That He died on the cross for your sins and that He rose from the dead three days later. It means that you let Him take control of your life and trust Him to forgive your sins and give you peace with God and eternal life.