

**Miss Mary's Witness**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Easter: April 16, 2017**  
**John 20:1-18**

I want to begin this morning's sermon with an affirmation:

I am grateful for remarkable women: Women of all ages – mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, wives, significant others, friends, and most importantly, all those whom we simply refer to as “Miss So-and-so.”

From Miriam to Lydia to Teresa of Avila to Harriet Tubman to Lottie Moon and Dorothy Day and Annie Armstrong and so many others, the Christian church has been nourished by women who have infused the qualities of grace, dignity, and fortitude into their faith – Women who had the courage to ask questions, and the humility to make their experience with the risen Christ a personal one.

And so friends, I am grateful that MISS Mary Magdalene (as I'm sure her friends at the First Baptist Church of the Galilee called her) – I am grateful that Miss Mary was the first person to see that empty tomb. I'm grateful because if it wasn't for Miss Mary, we may never have heard the Easter story.

As we explore this morning's text, I hope YOUR admiration for Miss Mary will grow as well.

Shocked. Stunned. Helpless. Yes, let's go with helpless – that's an adjective that best describes the way friends and followers of Jesus must have felt on that first Good Friday. Jesus had been crucified. That was hard enough. But the day was also nearing sundown on Sabbath, and not just any Sabbath: Passover was about to begin. Joseph and Nicodemus, friends of Jesus, secured the body, and hurriedly made arrangements to prepare it before sundown – they wrapped the body of Jesus in strips of linen cloth and spices, and placed it in a tomb nearby where Jesus had been crucified. And THEN, everyone waited.

It must have been a long Sabbath. What did the disciples, and Mary, and the other women who loved Jesus so much, and all those folks we never hear about – what did they do on that Sabbath? There were no busy routines that could help them forget their grief. None, none at all. So they waited.

And so our story begins. It's Sunday morning, early Sunday morning. And Miss Mary Magdalene is not gonna sit in her house for one second longer. The text never tells us why she goes. But I suspect she wanted to do the only thing that one can do after the death of a friend – She wanted to be present. She could not undo the headlines of Friday, but she could be there. And before the sun is even up, she goes to visit the tomb. But the stone has been removed and the body is no longer there. And so off Mary goes to tell Peter and the beloved disciple what she's seen. When she reaches them, Miss Mary tells them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

The two men spring into action, each of them running all the way to the tomb. After close inspection, they notice that the cloth that had been on Jesus' head was wrapped and set aside. Like crime-scene investigators, the two men realize that this is not the work of robbers – would robbers go through the trouble of neatly-wrapping linens in a pile?

The text tells us that the beloved disciple saw and believed, but that he did not yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. And the text never tells us of Peter's response. And then we learn that the two men return home.

In my opinion, the belief of the disciples is cursory at best. They have deduced that the open tomb is not the work of grave-robbers, but they cannot truly believe – No, not yet – They cannot and will not truly understand the risen Christ until they hear the complete witness of Miss Mary.

From the beginning, the gospel of John tells us that a series of events has transformed the world as we know it. Something extraordinary, remarkable, unbelievable, unimaginable has happened – the Word has become flesh – God, manifested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, has come and dwelled among us. And all those who believe in this truth will become children of God.

But remember, Mary Magdalene and the disciples don't have the same luxury that we have – We've read the prologue and they haven't! Miss Mary and the others are still living in a pre-resurrection world.

The two disciples exit stage left. And now Easter can really begin.

Miss Mary is all alone again. But, thank heavens for Miss Mary's curiosity and fortitude.

Mary needs to know what's happened. She simply must. And she will not retreat home until she knows. Don't let patriarchal traditions fool you. Miss Mary Magdalene may not have been afforded the same prominence as Peter and James and John and other disciples in the gospel writings, but she is every bit as perceptive and loyal and faithful. She and many other women followed Jesus in his ministry through the Galilee, and they listened and learned and loved intently.

Joyce Hollyday reminds us that in that final week, it was the women who stood by the cross and kept vigil. Hollyday writes: "Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, and the other disciples fell asleep in the garden when Jesus most needed their companionship. And when the tragic hour came, the disciples fled to the safety of their homes. But not Miss Mary and not the other women -- they were present, watching and weeping and waiting." And on that dark Sunday morning, here was Miss Mary again.

She decides to peek back into the tomb. "Maybe I'm just not seeing everything I am supposed to be seeing. Jesus' body has got to be here somewhere." She bends down and looks in, and this time she sees something different. Two angels are sitting where the body once was.

"Woman?" these angels ask. "Why are you weeping?" And with pain and grief and desperation and sadness and longing, she cries, "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him."

For Mary now knows what John's prologue has already revealed to its readers: God has come and dwelled among us.

And the realization that Jesus is dead has overwhelmed Mary. But it's the pre-resurrection world – and so all Mary can think to do is cling to Christ's body, something to hold, something tangible to remind her of the events that she has witnessed. For Mary, God was here, but now God has left and gone away.

But does the story end in death, and the disappearance of a body, and this emptiness? It just can't! Can it?

And can you feel the powerful imagery of darkness? Night has extinguished the sunlight, just as death has extinguished the light of Christ.

And I sort of imagine Miss Mary turning around, and she's somewhere in between frantic and frustrated. She rises from her crouch, deciding to go and seek the body somewhere else. And as she turns, she sees Jesus. But she is not yet able to recognize him.

"Woman?," Jesus asks, "Why are you weeping? And who are you looking for?"

Still a mix of frantic and frustrated, Mary says, "If you've taken the body, just let me know where you put it – Just please, please let me mourn with this body. This is what I need to do."

And then something wonderful happens. Miss Mary hears her name called.

"Mary," Jesus says, "It's me!"

How incredible it must have been for her to hear God call her by name.

"Teacher!" she says, and reaches out to embrace Jesus.

But Jesus stops her. Mary, you cannot cling to me. You are still living in a pre-resurrection world. The events of my life, and the resurrection that is unfolding have changed everything. I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God – our God!!! The story is not over, no far from it Miss Mary, the story is just beginning!!! For I have shown you how to love as God loves, and very soon that love will be accessible to you and all the others in the form of the Holy Spirit. You must go and tell the others. Go and tell the others that Christ has risen!

The cross did not mark the end of the story. For the author of John's gospel, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are intertwined – Jesus demonstrated for each of us, how we are to be in relationship with God and one another.

And at the very moment that Miss Mary hears her savior call her by name, she is swept into the reality of the post-resurrection world.

God's remarkable love has not been confined to the thirty-year life-span of Jesus of Nazareth – The incarnation is an event that transcends history.

Something extraordinary has happened – that same love that Jesus shared with God and God shared with Jesus is now available to Miss Mary, and to you and me, and to all the souls that have come before us and will come after us.

Christ's love endures, and just like it did for Miss Mary, it calls us by name.

And when we understand the truth of John's Gospel – the truth that God came and dwelled among us as Jesus, we instantly become part of a new truth: God now dwells in us and through us.

And neither death, nor earthly principalities, nor any other force will separate us from the love of God we know in Christ Jesus.

Rami Shapiro is a teller of stories. Shapiro writes that stories have a healing property. When we tell stories, we recreate the power of an original event, and the listener is invited to experience the story as if it's happening in the here and now. We Baptists call this process witnessing. Miss Mary's witness set off a chain reaction. Joyce Hollyday writes that Miss Mary, "refused to live in a broken present, and instead, she dared to dream a future full of promise." And in that audacious act, Miss Mary met the risen Christ!!!

Two Thousand Years have passed since the events of that first Holy Week. We do not have the ability to mark the exact spot or hour or even day where Miss Mary first encountered the risen Christ. We'll never know the exact words of the conversation that transpired between the two of them. There was no camera to capture the sparkling smile that Miss Mary surely possessed. And no forensics team will ever explain in rational terms how that stone was rolled away. But we have Miss Mary's witness. And we keep telling her story. And that has sufficed.

I am grateful for Miss Mary's witness, because her example has inspired so many women in my life to tell the same story with the same sense of enthusiasm:

Because of Miss Mary, I received the witness of Miss Frances and Miss Rebecca, who when I was a little boy showed me the power of God's love in the form of hugs, and hospitality and Brach's cinnamon discs.

Because of Miss Mary, I received the witness of Miss Clara and Miss Mary Ruth, who model consistency.

Because of Miss Mary, I received the witness of Miss Phyllis, whose creativity has made the gospel accessible to those who need it most.

Because of Miss Mary, we receive the witness of little girls and little boys who wave palm branches on Palm Sunday, and whose loud hosannas remind us that even in the darkest of times, God still lives and dwells among us

Because of Miss Mary, our community will receive the witness of future generations of women and men who will continue to surprise us with the tender mercies of God's love.

This Easter morning, like so many others before it, a bright orange sun slowly nudged away the darkness, and reminded us of the risen Christ. And we remembered the witness of Miss Mary.

But as we leave here this morning, let's honor Miss Mary. Let's make this Easter remembrance more than just an annual occurrence.

With each new day, with each new breath of air that fills our lungs, may we proclaim the risen Christ!!! And may we pray that God will give us the strength to be witnesses of that glorious Sunday morning –

May our hands reach out to hold the hands of friends whose bodies ache with disease, exhaust or muscle-atrophy;

May our prayers of love penetrate the concrete walls and steel bars of prisons where grace and forgiveness seem extinct;

May our fellowship and hospitality fill empty stomachs and clothe cold bodies and comfort lonely soles;

May God empower us to be a bright light in a dark world.

May God empower us to hear Miss Mary's witness, and better still, may God empower us to share her joy.

Miss Mary told a story: Christ the Lord is risen. Christ the Lord is risen indeed!!!

Good friends, what kind of story will you tell?

Amen.