

“The Great Follow Through”

John 20:1-18

Sermon Series: Follow Week 9: Exaltation

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Have you ever misplaced something? They say you spend one year of your life trying to find your car in the parking lot, three years looking for missing keys, and five years searching for overdue bills. All of us misplace something at sometime. Last Christmas my wife Lisa gave me the Tile. It's a device you clip to your key ring. After downloading the app on your phone and syncing it, the Tile allows you to find your keys by playing a little melody until they are discovered - usually under the couch cushions with the year-old cheese doodles. One day I was at work when suddenly I started emitting music that wouldn't stop. Lo and behold it came from the Tile in my pocket. If the Tile is playing that means only one thing: I am lost. Then it dawned on me: this is not a handy device to keep track of my keys - it's my wife's homing device to keep track of me.

Have you ever been lost? Have you ever had a loss?

- Have you lost the love you once felt for your spouse? You had it just a minute ago. Maybe it disappeared in all the confusion of living each day. Somewhere along the way you lost each other.
- Where did those little children go you used to carry around? You put them down over there and while you were busy they grew up into toddlers, teens or twenty-two year olds. Maybe your “babies” now have babies and live in other states.
- Have you lost your self-control? You know you shouldn't eat so much, drink so much, smoke so much, indulge so much. But it makes you feel good. Trouble is: you're also losing that good feeling. You take more stuff and get less pleasure. What's more, it's making you lose your grip on your family, your job and your life.
- Where did your loved one go? It seems like only yesterday that the whole family sat down to Thanksgiving dinner. All the seats will be filled this year, but there's still one or two missing persons. Of course, Mom lives on through her recipes and there are always stories about Dad or your spouse, brother, sister or child. But it's not the same. It never will be.
- And maybe the thing you've misplaced is your faith. You're losing your religion. The few Bible stories you learned in Sunday school seem irrelevant in the internet age. Maybe you only came today because someone twisted your arm.

There's a lot to lose in life: your health, your savings, your feelings of security, your self-image, your purpose, your reason for living. You just feel lost.

That's how Mary felt early Sunday morning: utterly, completely, devastatingly lost. And she knows what it means to be lost. She came from a fishing village on the

northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee named Migdol. The Bible calls it Magdala. In its day it was a busy port where fish were salted and sent to the far reaches of the empire. The other name for it was Tarichaea which means Pickled Fish. One of the most amazing discoveries is the Migdol synagogue – the oldest synagogue found in the Galilee.

Yet Migdol or Magdala probably holds no happy memories for Mary. It's likely her neighbors shunned her, called her crazy and other cruel names. Through the centuries she continues to be falsely accused as a lady of the evening or the lover of Jesus. Neither is true. This is what we know about her:

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. Luke 8:1-3

Mary was possessed and oppressed by seven demons. In the New Testament possessed people scream, fall to the ground, foam at the mouth, break chains, live among tombs. Seven demons can wreak a lot of havoc. We don't know what Mary did. We do know Jesus set her free from all of them. He came to town, preached in this synagogue, healed the sick and drove the demons from her. All Jesus promised in the blueprint of His kingdom – good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoner, release for the oppressed – happened to her. It must have been like waking from a long, dreadful nightmare. At last the voices are silent, her soul is serene, her heart is healed, her mind is clear, her actions are her own. She was dead and is alive again. She was lost and is found. And if someone does that for you, you follow Him.

And she did. Leaving the dark days of Magdala behind, Mary joined with other women – Joanna, Susanna, Mary the mother of Joseph – who walked with the twelve behind the Rabbi. Amazingly, Jesus let them. Other rabbis did not allow women to be their disciples. Jesus welcomed them in the same way He welcomed everyone. She followed the Master from the shores of Galilee to the gates of Jerusalem. She followed among the growing throng shouting for Jesus to be crowned King. She followed Him to the Temple every day where He taught huge crowds which hung on His every word. She followed Him to the Upper Room where they shared the Passover meal. That night,

Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times! John 13:36-38

Hours later it all came to pass: the arrest, trial and torture, the crowds crying for His execution. The disciples did indeed flee. Not Mary. She still she followed Him – from

Pilate's palace through narrow streets choked with bystanders and spectators – some cursing and others crying. Out of the city gate to foot of Skull rock, she followed.

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Matthew 27:55-56

Mary watched in agony as they nailed His wrists to the crossbeam and lifted Him high on the harsh gibbet. When darkness descended at noon and the earth convulsed and rumbled, she believed God would, at the last minute save Him. God didn't. With a loud cry Jesus breathed His last. Just to be certain, a soldier shoved a spear in Jesus' side. Mary shuddered so hard it felt like the spear passed through her. Now His limp body lay at her feet. All her hope, her peace, her love died. Having lived so long with demons, she could see Satan's fingerprints all over this, smell his brimstone breath, hear his infernal mocking laughter. The devil won. She felt utterly lost.

A godly man named Joseph performed one final kindness for her Rabbi. According to Jewish law, a body must be buried in 24 hours and it cannot be buried on the Sabbath. With the Sabbath fast approaching, Joseph quickly wrapped the body in a shroud. Crucified criminals were frequently thrown on the trash dump. It was unheard of to place one in a rich man's family mausoleum. Yet that's what Joseph did.

Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. Matthew 27:59-61

Jesus was right. Where He went, Mary could not follow. Yet she could make one more follow up visit to the grave, pay one last honor to her fallen Master. Then, just when she thought she could bear no more, this heart wrenching tragedy turned worse. In the gray morning light, Mary discovered the tomb had been violated. The heavy stone lay toppled over on the ground. Too afraid to enter the burial chamber, she ran for help. Peter and John immediately raced to the site. By the time she returned, they were gone.

With tears stinging her eyes, she summoned enough courage to look in and see if thieves damaged the body. Surprisingly there *were* two men sitting on either side of the wrappings. They didn't look like thieves. And the wrappings *were* intact except for one detail: there was no body in them. It looked like a discarded, deflated cocoon. "Woman, why are you crying?" they asked. What a strange question. What else does one do in a graveyard? "They have taken my Lord away," she complained, "and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).

Sensing the presence of someone behind her, she turned and saw the caretaker of the cemetery. He asked the same ridiculous question, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Then it dawned on her. His burial was hasty on Friday. Sundown and the Sabbath forced them to act quickly. It was just a temporary burial. Now the Sabbath was over, this man simply relocated the body to another grave. "Sir, if you

have carried him away,” she replied between sobs, “tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” She didn’t consider how she could move a corpse all by herself. But now was not the time for logic. Then the misplaced corpse spoke her name: “Mary.” She looked up and there before her very eyes was her Rabbi, her Master, her Lord. He was not lost ... and neither was she.

On that first Easter Sunday, Mary preaches the first and shortest Easter sermon of all. She simply says, “I have seen the Lord!” (John 20:18). If you have lost someone, if you feel lost, if you think you are fighting a losing battle, I invite you to grab hold of three secrets in those five words.

First, Mary says “**I** have seen the Lord.” Faith must be personal. Living in a Christian country, growing up in a Christian family or attending a Christian church does not make you a follower of Jesus any more than walking into a McDonalds makes you a hamburger. You can’t inherit faith nor can you rely on someone else’s faith to save you. Author William Gibson wrote a book called, A Mass for the Dead. In it, he describes how he went to clean out his mother’s house after she died. Gibson was not a believer but he wanted to understand the secret of his mother’s faith. So he sat in her chair, put on her spectacles and read her Bible in the hope that he could see what she saw.

Friends, you cannot borrow someone else’s faith. You must take the step to believe. Jesus had a personal relationship with Mary. She knew it was Him when He called her by name. The Lord is calling each one of you by name. He called you here to this place, this day, not just to go through a ritual or hear powerful music. He longs to have a loving personal relationship with you. He is calling your name.

Second, Mary says, “**I Have Seen** the Lord.” Jesus is close to you and me. He is with us all the time. Yet we don’t see Him because we are too preoccupied to look for Him. Mary was so overwhelmed with grief and consumed with her plans to find her misplaced Master she couldn’t see He was right in front of her. You and I are so distracted with our tasks and plans for daily living we miss the Lord of life.

While she was enjoying a transatlantic ocean trip, Billie Burke, the actress who played Glenda the Good Witch in “The Wizard of Oz,” noticed a gentleman at the next table suffering from a bad cold. “Are you uncomfortable?” she asked sympathetically. The man nodded. “I’ll tell you just what to do for it,” she offered. “Go back to your stateroom and drink lots of orange juice. Take two aspirins. Cover yourself with all the blankets you can find. Sweat the cold out. I know just what I’m talking about. I’m Billie Burke from Hollywood.” The man smiled warmly and said, “Thanks, I’m Dr. Mayo from the Mayo clinic.”¹ Instead of telling God what to do, instead of pursuing our own plans, we must stop, look and listen to the Lord. Open your eyes, pray, read His Word, worship Him and you will see the Lord.

Finally, Mary says, “I have seen **the Lord**.” Mary didn’t see just a prophet, priest or king. She didn’t meet a philosopher, economist, revolutionary or president. She was

¹ Bits & Pieces, March 3, 1994, p. 24

face to face with the Lord. He doesn't just give information but transformation. He doesn't simply inspire or enlighten. He saves us from sin and death. And He is the only One who can do this because He is the only One who has beaten both. He opens the door to the Great Follow-Through. Because of the Resurrection we can follow Him through death into life eternal.

When her husband died in 1924 Natalya Krupskaya said to her fellow people, "Do not let your sorrow for Ilyich find expression in outward veneration of his personality. Do not raise monuments to him, or palaces to his name, do not organize pompous ceremonies in his memory." But the Russians ignored her words. They raised statues and named institutions and cities after her husband. Their supreme act of worship was to build an enormous red granite tomb for him on Red Square. They called him the lord of the new humanity. He was the savior of the world. After his death, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was transformed into a god for the atheistic Soviet Union. At the height of its power, a party official spoke for two hours about the demise of Christianity and the triumph of Communism. Finally he turned to an orthodox priest in the audience and said, "What do you say to that." The priest simply stood up, turned and said, "He is risen!" and the whole crowd replied, "He is risen, indeed!"

The USSR is gone. Communism is dying. And Lenin is dead. He was not the lord of the new humanity. He was not the savior of the world. How do we know? Lenin is still in his tomb. Jesus' tomb is empty! He is the Lord of humanity and the Savior of the world! Mary said, "I have seen the Lord." Have you seen the Lord? Will you open your eyes and see and believe in the Lord? It will make all the difference in the world. Especially when you face the tomb.

Last Monday, Genevieve Hutchens, the 94-year-old mother of Cliff Hutchens, passed away at Chandler Hall's hospice. It reminded me of another time, many years ago, when I received a call from Chandler Hall. The woman's name was Shawn. She was in her early 40s and filled with cancer. Shawn had only a few days to live and she requested to speak to a Presbyterian minister. So the hospice nurses called me.

Her room was filled with pictures, teddy bears, flowers, cards and family. But the disease had had its way with her. She was weak and thin – a shadow of the smiling woman in the pictures. The family left so I could be alone with her. I asked what was on her mind. Like many, Shawn wrestled with a mixture of faith and doubt. "I believe in God and in Jesus," she said. "But where did God come from? Who is Jesus? Why did He die? How do we know He rose from the dead?" They were deep questions from a thoughtful mind. We worked through each one until she was satisfied.

Then she asked the question from her soul. "Tell me what's on the other side. What is heaven like?" "Heaven is your Father's house," I began, "Jesus is waiting there with open arms to bring you to the place He prepared for you in His Father's house (John 14:1-4). He's the Good Shepherd who will lead you through this valley of the shadow of death so that you may dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23). Heaven is a party that Jesus will throw to welcome you home. (Luke 15:11-24)."

Finally we reached the utter depths of her soul. She asked the question lurking below all the others. “But how do I know He’ll forgive me?” Shawn then opened her heart and revealed the sins and burdens that weighed her down. “I pray and pray” she confessed, “but I’m just not sure He will forgive me.” Like Mary Magdalene, she felt oppressed by her demons.

“Shawn, I believe with all my heart Jesus will forgive you,” I assured her. “That’s what Good Friday and Easter are all about.” “Tell me what they mean,” she asked. “Our sins separated us from God. They stood like a great barrier between God and us. God did not want there to be sin in us, just as we don’t want any cancer cells to be in you. But God knows we cannot get rid of sin. So He sent His Son Jesus to take all our sin upon Himself on the Cross. And then He died and they buried Him in the tomb. If He stayed in the tomb, we would conclude our sins were too much for Him, He failed to take away our sin. But when He rose on Easter morning, Jesus proved He was stronger than all our sins, He is able to wipe them all away. Shawn, He already died to take away all your sins. Now, the only thing left is for you to accept His gift of forgiveness and believe in Him.”

“Would you show me how?” Her face brightened. “Can we do that now?” “Of course.” I led her through a brief prayer in which she asked God to forgive her for all her sins and then she gave her life to Jesus Christ, her Savior and Lord. When we finished, Shawn was calm and peaceful. Even her family noticed the difference. I’ll never forget what she said. “Now I know I’m forgiven. I’m not afraid now. It feels right. I feel good. I’m ready now. I wish I had done this earlier.”

Shawn died the following Monday. The Lord granted her last request. He forgave her and took her home. Shawn said, “I wish I had done this earlier.” Don’t wait. Give your life to Jesus today. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who is risen from the dead and you will “have life in His name” (John 20:31). Then, like Shawn, you can follow Him through death into life. Amen.