

His *First Steps* Led Outside the Tomb

- ✦ To Mary, who didn't seem to notice two angels. (vv.11-13)
- ✦ To Mary, who thought Jesus was a gardener. (vv.14-15)
- ✦ To Mary, who witnessed to us all, "I have seen the Lord!" (vv.16-18)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Favorable reviews confirm the fact that the movie *The Passion of the Christ* has been a blessing to many. One man told how it got him back to church after a long time away, active in ministry, and so comforted though dying of cancer, that he looks forward to holding Jesus' hand in glory. Search online for "Passion of Christ closing scene," and you find 1 minute, 24 seconds with 597,000 views.

Maybe it's not so surprising that most of the "Rotten Tomato" critics complain about being emotionally drained and depressed after such a "sadistic" portrayal of human cruelty. Many show they consider Jesus a fraud. And yet, for a two-hour+ movie to include less than two minutes of triumph is so "Hollywood." Humanity has such a hard time with good news of any kind, much less God's Good News of full and free salvation from sin. "Ah, there's the rub." As the ancient Israelites complained to the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Christ, "***Stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!***" (30:11 NIV)

Could that be why God used such unlikely witnesses of Christ's death and resurrection? No one expected it, though Jesus predicted His betrayal, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection multiple times. No one believed it – not even His closest followers, though His enemies feared a fake and posted a guard, guaranteeing the real story! All had to be convinced by Jesus Himself appearing to them ***over a period of forty days***. (Acts 1:3 EHV) And just as cinematic skill cannot capture the depth of Christ's suffering our hell forsaken by God on the cross, so moments of His Easter victory are hard to show. Powerful, memorable movie! But the Scripture record is so much better. **His *First Steps* Led Outside His Tomb.**

✦ To Mary, who didn't seem to notice two angels. (vv.11-13)

If merely watching *The Passion of the Christ* movie can leave you feeling exhausted and emotionally drained, imagine what it was like for Jesus' first disciples who actually lived through the nightmare of Good Friday! How horrific for the women who followed Jesus! John the Gospel writer says, "***Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were standing near the cross.***" (19:25) How you could you not suffer post-traumatic stress disorder?

These women loved their Lord so much they were first to visit his tomb Easter morning "***carrying the spices they had prepared.***" (Luke 24:1) Their final respects for their dead teacher mixed with worry about how they would move that massive stone. What about the Roman guards and Pilate's seal? Still in shock, they went to the tomb at the crack of dawn. The first time Mary Magdalene arrived there, ***she saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she left and ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she told them, "and we don't know where they put him!"*** (20:1f) Mary then followed Peter and John back to the tomb. Those two found everything so neat inside, that no grave robber would have left it that way. The tomb was empty, and Jesus' body was gone. So they went back home. Why stay? John admits: (***They still did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.***) (20:9) Can we relate to being a little slow to grasp "***how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ***"? (Ephesians 3:18 NIV) His power?

“But Mary stood outside facing the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she bent over, looking into the tomb. She saw two angels in white clothes sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ ” (20:11-13) Because her heart was broken! Because she was in shock! She couldn’t see what was right in front of her: ***“two angels in white clothes.”*** Halos and harps? Maybe not, but Mary wouldn’t have noticed! Her grief cried, ***“They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”*** (20:13b) She was held in the nightmare of Good Friday. Christ’s body hanging on the center cross...Christ’s lifeless body laid in the new tomb Joseph of Arimathea had cut into the rock...images seared into her heart and mind. (Matthew 27)

Of course, she sobbed in the kind of grief that wells up from deep inside and comes crashing out like ocean waves you can’t hold back. As far as Mary knew, her best Friend and Teacher was dead. She had been terribly afflicted by seven demons which Jesus had driven out of her, along with other diseases (Luke 8:2). Such a Deliverer would always be dearest to her heart. And He had died! Along with Him died all those promises, all those hopes, and all those dreams of joy and peace from His ***“preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God... from one town and village to another.”*** (Luke 8:1) There was no cure for such grief except the cure which no one could imagine despite Jesus’ predictions.

✦ To Mary, who thought Jesus was a gardener. (vv.14-15)

Maybe you wonder how the apostle John’s account could be so tender with so many personal details nearly sixty years after Jesus’ resurrection (ca. A.D. 90). Most of us can’t even remember what we had for breakfast yesterday. But Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit who would ***“remind you of everything I told you.”*** (John 14:26) Everything about John’s account shows an eyewitness record.

Mary ***“turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?’ Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, ‘Sir, if you carried him off, tell me where you laid him, and I will get him.’ ”***

Did you notice the second time now that the heavenly beings addressed Mary Magdalene as ***“woman”***? There’s something we should not miss in our gender-dysphoric society. Dysphoria is a type of dissatisfaction over many things, but in the news lately is the dissatisfaction about gender. It may not satisfy those who think humans accidentally evolved from slime, but the oldest record which also claims to be God’s eyewitness account says, ***“God created the man in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them.”*** (Genesis 1:27 EHV) God’s special care for the man and the woman runs throughout the ancient records so miraculously preserved in the Bible. This tender, determined love of Jesus shown as He hung on the cross Good Friday. Mary Magdalene would have heard Jesus say to his mother Mary, ***“Woman, here is your son!”*** (John 19:26) Now the same Lord of love and mercy echoes His angels asking Mary Magdalene again, ***“Woman, why are you weeping?”*** Such loving kindness and tender mercy cures the guilt of male failure and powers unconditional love in us too.

Scholars try to answer why Mary **thought Jesus was a gardener**. A few possibilities? Maybe our Savior kept her from recognizing Him. He’s God; He can do whatever He wants. No doubt Mary’s eyes were blurred from weeping, sobbing, gut-wrenching sorrow. Maybe Jesus looked different after His resurrection, as when the two Emmaus disciples didn’t recognize Him walking with them. And of course, Jesus was the very last person anyone expected to see alive again after the nightmare of Good Friday.

How can you recognize the living Lord when all you can remember are the horrors on Golgotha’s hill, when you stood beside ***“Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister, [and] Mary the wife of Clopas”*** (19:25)? You can’t! Not doubled over weeping, still stuck in Good Friday. Who doesn’t get so focused on trouble and grief at times we can’t recognize Jesus either? Stuck grieving over a loved one the Lord took home always too soon? Stuck worrying about how we’re going to pay our bills despite inflation and company downsizing? COVID or some other sickness? Retirement savings? Your business? Our congregation

moving forward in uncertain times? So many fears to keep you mired in the bleakness of Good Friday! But there is only one way to roll back our massive stones of fear, sorrow, worry, and weeping!

Maybe you remember that story of Martin Luther seeing his wife Katie come into his study all dressed in black. “Who died?” he asked. “There’s no funeral today!” “Jesus is dead,” Katie replied sadly. “No He’s not! He’s risen!” came the impatient pastor’s reply. “Then why are you acting as if our Lord is still dead?” Katie Luther asked. **He is risen! Risen indeed! His *First Steps Led Outside His Tomb!***

✠ **To Mary, who witnessed to us all, “I have seen the Lord!” (vv.16-18)**

Just one word for Jesus to lift the fog, the fear, the darkness from Mary’s heart and mind. Just one word to free her just outside our Savior’s tomb. *Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and replied in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means, “Teacher”). Jesus told her, “Do not continue to cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father—to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” She also told them the things he said to her.*

The King of kings and Lord of lords had finished His work to pay in full for the sins of the whole human race. Does that include you, or what? The One who had chained Satan and his demons in the dungeons of hell, had already descended into hell early Easter morning to declare His eternal triumph. (Colossians 2:15) Christ our Lord is the One whom the Father exalted and gave *“the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:9-11) Have friend who say, “I don’t believe”? Answer: “You will. Don’t let it be too late.” This risen and glorious Christ is our Good Shepherd. He knows all of His sheep by name. (John 10:14)

So He simply said, *“Mary.”* And the darkness of Good Friday yielded to God’s Son at Easter. *“Rabboni!”* (literally *My Teacher!*) Tears of joy flowed. Waves of relief swept through her! Mary hugged her Lord! Clinging so tightly she didn’t ever want to let him go again! But that wouldn’t work. Jesus had other sorrowing souls to see, like Thomas and Peter. Hundreds of witnesses needed to be ready to swear to us in the pages of Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:1-8), *“I have seen the Lord!”*

His first steps led outside his tomb, and Jesus made sure he met Mary, because He knew she needed Him. Then our Lord sent Mary with one of the sweetest words needed by His disciples. This was the first time Jesus used this name – after they argued about who was the greatest, after they betrayed Him, denied Him, fled from Him in His darkest hour. Jesus told Mary, *“Go to my brothers and tell them....”* Such forgiving Easter grace would power the *brothers’* throughout the world with Good News for many others to stand shoulder to shoulder, shouting to us as one: *“We have seen the Lord!”*

Peter with his hand in the Bible: *“To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”* (2 Peter 1:16)

John, an old man who could never forget: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have observed and our hands have touched regarding the Word of Life—the life appeared, and we have seen it. We testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We are proclaiming what we have seen and heard also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us.”* (1 John 1:1-3)

Together these witnesses shout to us, “Easter is real! The Lord’s gracious forgiveness of sins is real!” Crystal clear is Jesus’ message through Mary for His *“brothers.”* As the writer to the Hebrews assures us, the risen Lord is *not ashamed to call [us] His “brothers”* either (Hebrews 2:10-15).

That is why he came. That’s why he took every one of **His Final Steps** to the center cross on Calvary. And that’s why **His First Steps Led Outside His Tomb!** Amen.