

**WHAT JESUS SAID TO MARY MAGDALENE****JOHN 20:11-18**

The last words of famous people are deemed important. Some are indeed interesting and others profound. Here's a sample. "I have not told half of what I saw." (Marco Polo) "Hold the cross so I may see it through the flames!" (Joan of Arc) "Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." (Christopher Columbus) "Trust in God, and you need not fear." (Jonathan Edwards) "Are you guys ready? Let's roll." (Todd Beamer – on United Airlines flight 93 on September 11<sup>th</sup>) "Let me go to the house of the Father." (Pope John Paul II) "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow." (Steve Jobs)

We've just come through that part of the Christian calendar known as the seasons of Lent and Easter. It's quite common during those weeks to hear a series of messages on Jesus seven statements as He hung on the cross. "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing... (to the dying thief next to Him) Today, you will be with Me in paradise... I am thirsty... (to His mother and His disciple, John) Here is your son; here is your mother... My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?... It is finished... Into Your hands I commit My spirit." Sometimes those statements are referred to as the last words of Jesus, because they were indeed His final words before He died. But, there's just one problem. Jesus didn't stay dead, did He?

So, those weren't really Jesus' last words. Jesus said some very powerful, very meaningful, and very important things after His rose from the dead and before He ascended back to Heaven. That was about a 40 day period of time according to Scripture. Those statements were the real last words of Jesus – at least the final words He spoke here on Earth between His return to Heaven and when He comes back again. Christians refer to that future event as the Second Coming. I thought it would be appropriate for us to make a study of Jesus' real last words – what He said after Easter but before His ascension. We begin today with something Jesus said on Easter Day to one of His most faithful followers – Mary Magdalene. Let's read it. To better understand this story, I want to ask and try to answer three questions prompted by the story itself. The first question is one Jesus Himself asked Mary in v. 15.

**WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

What do you know about Mary Magdalene? She was from a prosperous town called Magdala in the region of Galilee – the same area Jesus grew up in. Sometimes she's depicted as a prostitute before she became Jesus' follower. The Bible never says that was true of Mary, however. Here's what it does say about her. "He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons." (Lk. 8:1-2 NLT) Wow! One can only imagine what an Oprah Winfrey or *60 Minutes* would have done with Mary Magdalene! In any case, Mary became a devoted follower of Jesus. She became a part of a group of other men and women along with the twelve disciples who followed Jesus from town to town in a kind of unofficial entourage. She was there when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey just a few days before His death. She was there when the mob shouted at Jesus, "Crucify Him! Crucify

Him!” She was there when the whips ripped the skin off of Jesus’ back and the thorns made deep cuts into His forehead. And, yes, she was most definitely right there when Jesus hung on the cross. She witnessed His awful agony and His death.

It was now the third day since that horrific scene and Mary’s mind and heart were probably numb with grief and sadness. Those first few days after the crucifixion were filled with intense gloom and disillusionment for Jesus’ followers. Yes, Jesus had indeed predicted His resurrection, but none of them understood what He was saying. I’m quite sure when Jesus died, something died within the hearts of all His followers. Faith died. Hope died. Purpose died. I doubt Mary was different in her reaction. Like all of them, Mary’s life was shattered. The only thing that made sense to Mary was just to be near Jesus’ dead body. Those of you who have lost someone you love very much know what I mean. For a while, there’s some kind of comfort in going to the cemetery. At least you’re close to your loved one’s remains. So, Mary made her way to Jesus’ tomb very early on that first Easter Day – so early that the sun hadn’t yet risen. She was coming to the tomb not because she expected to find a risen Savior, but instead to add additional spices to Jesus’ dead body. How she was going to do even that is hard to figure out. After all, the tomb had been closed and sealed with a huge stone rolled in front of it. It was guarded by Roman soldiers. But overwhelming grief is not always rational. This was Mary’s way of expressing her grief over and love for Jesus.

So, Mary had arrived at the tomb only to find the guards gone and the stone moved away. She didn’t immediately say, “Wow! Jesus is risen just like He said.” Instead, she thought someone had stolen His body. How hard that must have been for Mary! Jesus being dead was bad enough, but now someone had desecrated His place of burial. She ran to tell the disciples about this terrible act of vandalism. She told Peter and John who took off for the tomb leaving poor Mary in the dust. Eventually, she arrived back at the tomb only to find Peter and John had come and gone. I’ve got to believe Mary must have lost it emotionally at this point. It was likely all too much to process. We read here that she was alone at the tomb crying her heart out. In the midst of her utter despair and brokenness of heart, Jesus – the risen Jesus – approached her and said, “Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” (Jo. 20:15 NLT)

Can I ask you the question Jesus asked Mary that first Easter, “Who are you looking for?” It’s a question Jesus asks you and me through the Holy Spirit. All of us are looking for something or someone. What or who are we looking for? All of us are looking for something or someone that will give our lives purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. We’re seeking life with a capital “L.” It can be confusing because the world we live in offers a multitude of possible answers to that searching question. I’m reminded of the story of a newly hired assistant accountant who was being briefed on his new job by his new employer. He said to him, “Now these accounts over here are especially important. I want you to add up each column of numbers at least three times before you give me the result.” A bit later that day, the new employee put a piece of paper on his boss’ desk and said, “I’ve actually added up these numbers ten times.” The boss was about to compliment this new hire on his diligence until he heard what came next. “And here are my ten different answers!” When you raise the question

about what should be life's purpose, meaning, or fulfillment (who are you looking for?), you're likely to get ten – maybe 110 – different answers. Like what? Get an education. Pursue a meaningful career. Find a spouse. Have a family. Get money and buy lots of stuff. Invest wisely. Chase after the respect of others. Stay healthy. Retire well.

There's only one good answer to Jesus' question, "Who are you looking for?" It's Jesus Himself. He's the only one worth seeking. He's the only one who gives life, purpose, direction, and fulfillment that lasts. He's the only one who can give life with a capital "L." God has designed your heart and mind in such a way that you'll always be restless, unfulfilled, and searching until Jesus fills that emptiness inside of us. Jesus asked Mary Magdalene that question in likely the most disappointing, discouraging, and desolate moment of her life. She still didn't recognize Jesus. She still thought Jesus was dead. She thought his body had been stolen and probably desecrated. Likewise, Jesus often comes to you and me at the most difficult moments in our lives. I suggest He asks us that same question through the Holy Spirit, "Who (or what) are you looking for?"

What kind of Jesus was Mary searching for? Even though Mary loved Jesus, she was seeking a dead Jesus, a powerless Jesus, and an irrelevant Jesus. Many people are looking for that kind of Jesus today – a Jesus who will overlook their sin and brokenness rather than confront it, a Jesus who will demand nothing of you, a Jesus who exists to bring peace and comfort to your life. Yes, many people are looking for a thoroughly manageable, don't-rock-the-boat, status quo Jesus. Mary was never going to find that kind of Jesus. Neither will you nor I. That kind of Jesus just doesn't exist.

Two of my favorite characters in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* are Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. In all of those stories, Aslan the Lion is a type or a symbol of Jesus. In one of the early scenes, the human children in the story first hear about Aslan from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. The dialogue goes like this. "Ooh!" says Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." Mrs. Beaver replies, "That you will, dearie, and make no mistake. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then, he isn't safe?" asked Lucy, one of the other children. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course, he isn't safe! But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

Who – or what - are you looking for? Really? A safe Jesus, a tame Jesus, a Jesus that demands nothing from you? Or are you seeking the real Jesus – the risen Lord, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He's interested in giving you real life – capital "L" life, but He's likely to turn your life upside down to do it. That's what the real Jesus does in your life and mine. Have you found Him yet? Here's a second question.

## **TO WHOSE FAMILY DO YOU BELONG?**

Now, that question is based on what Jesus said to Mary there in v. 17, "Don't cling to me, for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (Jo. 20:17

NLT) Mary didn't recognize Jesus when He first spoke to her. She thought he was the gardener. It's interesting she didn't recognize Jesus, isn't it? We don't know why for sure. Was it still too dark to see Jesus' face clearly? Was the physical appearance of the risen Jesus quite different than what He looked like before He died on the cross? Or, was Mary so emotionally upset she was incapable of recognizing Jesus?

Then Jesus simply said, "Mary." There it was – His voice, the voice of Jesus. In that instant, whatever had prevented Mary from recognizing Jesus disappeared. "Master!" she responded. Domesticated animals and pets recognize the voice of their master and learn to do so quickly. Charlie Frank raised the elephant Neeta from birth and trained her as a circus performer. On retirement he gave her to the San Diego Zoo. After they had not seen each other for fifteen years, a television crew filmed their reunion. Frank called Neeta from about a hundred yards away. She came to him immediately and performed her old routines on command. Her past experience gave her the power to recognize his voice. We can learn to recognize God's voice, too, just like Mary recognized the voice of Jesus.

I imagine Mary rushed to hug the One she loved more than anyone in the whole world. I can see her latching on to Jesus fiercely. She was afraid someone might come and take Him away again. Literally, Jesus said, "Stop holding me" rather than "Do not cling to me." It wasn't that Jesus was uncomfortable being hugged or grabbed by Mary. Instead, it was highly likely Mary was quite content to keep holding on to Jesus forever! She simply wasn't about to let Him go. But Jesus had a mission for her. "But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (Jo. 20:17 NLT)

That was the very first time Jesus called His disciples "my brothers." One of the great myths many people believe is that God is the Father of everyone and all human beings are really brothers and sisters spiritually. Now, God created everyone – that's true – but Creator is different than Father. Father suggests a different kind of relationship altogether. In fact, Jesus said to some of the religious leaders of His day who opposed and hated Him, "For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does." (Jo. 8:44 NLT) The Bible teaches that there are two spiritual families – the family of God and the "family" – if you can dare call it that – of the devil. To whose family do you really belong? Spiritually speaking, who is your father?

One of the greatest results of Jesus' death and resurrection is the creation of a whole new spiritual family with God as the Father. Here's what the Bible says, "For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." (Rom. 8:29 NLT) In another place, the Bible says, "So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters." (Heb. 2:11 NLT) When you surrender your life to Jesus – when you put your trust in Him - and become His follower, at that moment God becomes your spiritual Father. You're adopted into His forever family and you become His spiritual son or daughter. That was the wonderful news Mary was being asked to take back and share with Jesus' disciples.

God was creating a whole new family. “But go find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father.’” (Jo. 20:17 NLT)

I hope you can grasp how this news was and still is supremely wonderful. The Bible says, “See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!” (1 Jo. 3:1 NLT) It would be wonderful enough if God just didn’t send us to Hell. It would be wonderful enough if God just forgave our sins. It would be wonderful enough if He just gave us the gift of eternal life. It would be wonderful enough if He just allowed us to enjoy Heaven. But God goes above and beyond our wildest expectations and makes us His children. We are adopted into His forever family. So, to whose family do you belong? It doesn’t just happen. You aren’t born into God’s family by growing up in a home where Mom and Dad followed Jesus. You aren’t a part of God’s family because you attend church. It happens as the direct result of a conscious decision that you make. You put your trust in Jesus. You begin to love Jesus. The desire to follow Jesus becomes greater and greater.

I like the story of a father who was trying to teach his young son responsibility. The boy wanted to go over to a friend’s house a few blocks away to play. Dad gave him permission under the condition his son call home as soon as he had arrived at this friend’s home. At first, the young boy forgot and Dad had to call over to the friend’s house to make sure he got there safely. Dad told him if he forgot to call home the next time, he’d forfeit the opportunity to hang out with his friend. A few days later, the boy went over to his friend’s house again and he forgot to call home again. Dad thought to himself, “I really don’t want to punish him.” But he also realized a message needed to be sent to his son. As he dialed the home of his son’s friend, he asked God for wisdom. The Holy Spirit left a clear impression in his mind, “Treat him like I treat you.” With that, Dad let the phone ring once and then hung up before it got answered. A few seconds later, his phone rang and it was his son. “I’m here and OK, Dad,” said his son. “What took you so long to call me?” asked his dad. “We started playing and I just forgot. But, Dad, I heard the phone ring and then I remembered,” the boy said. “I’m glad you remembered,” said Dad. “Have fun, son.” Your Heavenly Father and mine is just as kind and as gentle as that father. How often we think of God as a Father who waits eagerly to punish us when we step out of line! Wrong! Perhaps He “rings” into our lives many times hoping we’ll phone home. Here’s the third question.

### **HAVE YOU SEEN THE LORD?**

Mary Magdalene’s life was transformed after her encounter with Jesus outside His empty tomb. Her life would never be the same again. She rushed off to tell the disciples the news of Jesus’ resurrection. What did she say? “I have seen the Lord!” (Jo. 20:18 NLT) She didn’t just say, “I’ve seen Jesus” or “I’ve seen you know who.” No, I have seen the Lord. I have to believe in that moment, Mary realized she had encountered not just a wise teacher, or a good friend, or a great man. No, she had been in the actual presence of the LORD, God in human flesh, the King of kings and, yes, the Lord of lords. The experience of seeing Jesus risen and alive again transformed the lives of every one of Jesus’ followers. That alone provides the reason

why so many of them were willing to die a martyr's death for their faith in the years that followed. That's also why so many of them made telling others about Jesus the single greatest focus of their lives from that moment on. Everything else was a distant second.

Have you seen the Lord? I haven't either. Not literally, of course. But you don't have to see the risen Jesus physically in order to see Him – to understand His significance and to appreciate how His life, death, and resurrection changes everything. Down through the centuries, many Christians since then have been every bit as committed to Jesus as those who literally saw the risen Jesus. There are followers of Jesus today who are as just as committed as those first followers. I'm reminded of what Jesus said to Thomas, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." (Jo. 20:29 NLT) German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, has made this insightful comment. "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

Have you seen the Lord? Have you ever been personally overwhelmed by the significance of who He is and what He accomplished? Do you see how it changes everything? This is the best news in the world – the news Jesus gave Mary on that first Easter. God is real. The Bible is true. Your sins are forgiven. Your life has a purpose, a direction, and a fulfillment larger than anything you could manufacture for it. The ultimate power of death has been broken. You have a Father. You've been adopted into His family. Heaven is your eternal home. Have you seen the Lord?

Mars One is a non-profit organization that has set the lofty goal of establishing a human colony on Mars by 2027. They plan to send four pioneers as a test group and then add another four volunteers every two years. They'll have to be highly resourceful, since they'll need to serve as the colony's chefs, farmers, doctors, and engineers. The most striking pre-requisite for being a volunteer pioneer is the knowledge there are no return flights. Since a one-way trip takes seven months and costs a small fortune, the volunteers need to be willing to die on Mars. Despite this obstacle, Mars One has had no problem attracting highly educated people willing to die on another planet. There were more than 200,000 video applications. That's been whittled down to 1,058, then 660, and now about 100 ambitious visionaries. The Mars One web site advises: "Once on Mars, there are no means to return to Earth. Mars is home. A grounded, deep sense of purpose will help each astronaut maintain his or her psychological stability and focus as they work together toward a shared and better future."

If there are people out there willing to lay down their lives for a no-return trip to Mars, how much more should every disciple of Jesus be willing to follow Him wherever He leads. Because it's only in Jesus that any of us will ever discover "a shared and better future." He is the Lord. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Have you seen Him? Have you met Him? Do you know Him? Will you follow Him?