

Women Coming to Jesus --- the One who Comes and Stays
Text

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

We've spent time with some amazing women in our gathering here together. I mean just look around you. This place is full of amazing women. I want to say a personal word of thanks to the amazing women -- Darlene, Lynne Gilbert, the leaders of the Break out groups and other members of the team --- who put this together. And thank you to all of you working so hard around the edges to make everything work. You are indeed amazing women. And we've spent time with some amazing Bible women too. Women Coming to Jesus. They, like us, find their way to Jesus for a variety of reasons and come to the Lord in a variety of ways. Some come on their own. Some are brought by others. Some are respectable. Some --- not so much. Some you would expect to show up. Others you would expect to stay away --- even run away. Some show up in the texts more than once, their names remembered through the generations. Some barely get mentioned at all No one knows their name. But they are all there. They are all there because they are women coming to Jesus.

INTRO TO SERMON

We are going to wind up our time together by exploring what we can learn from a woman called Mary. We don't know a lot about this woman even though she shows up on a regular basis in the Jesus stories. Always

Mary is there. Mary appears in all four Gospel narratives. Her name is mentioned 12 times, which is actually more than most of the male apostles and more than any other woman except for Jesus' mother, Mary. Now keep in mind, in this historical era, women were rarely referred to by name in any type of literature. That's one thing that makes the Bible unique in its time --- and---- is an indication of the truth of what we read there. In that day, no one would have added a woman's name to a made-up story. But the women do show up and they are named in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. And Mary of Magdala was named a lot.

HEALED

Let's take a look. Her first appearance explains the role she had in Jesus' ministry.

ON SCREEN

Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterward he (Jesus) went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Let's start with the specific description of Mary. *Called Magdalene.*

Scholars believe this simply indicates that this Mary was from the seaside village of Magdala. It was tagged to her name to distinguish her from the many other Marys who are part of the story. Then these

words...*from whom seven demons had gone out*. Now as you probably know, at this time, all illness was attributed to the work of demons. Obviously, Mary had been severely ill in some way. We do not know what the illness was. There has been much speculation. Some assume some kind of psychological personality disorder --- hence multiple demons. We are of course just guessing. But here's the worst guess ... and the most slanderous guess. The use of the number seven has caused Mary Magdalene to be represented as a prostitute. Why? Because of the concept of seven virtues and seven "deadly" sins. Here's the problem with that character assassination. The concept of seven virtues and seven sins did not even emerge until the Middle Ages---hundreds of years after Mary was walking with Jesus. That's when it was applied *retroactively* to Mary of Magdala. Search the scripture and you will discover, that there is no Biblical basis whatsoever for categorizing Mary as a prostitute. It's just pure slander. And one perpetuated, I believe, by the domination of male figures in Biblical Commentary and Church pulpits. Now, I probably would not have said that publicly when I was serving a church ... but I do believe it's true. And here's why Man came up to me after hearing a sermon on Mary Magdalene ... *I hated to hear that bit about Mary not being a prostitute ... that was the only sexy part of whole story*. In the Middle Ages, this presentation of Mary was reinforced when the Cosmetic Industry made Mary Magdalene their patron saint and used her The glamorous former prostitute to

promote their industry. So forget the prostitute bit. It's pure slander, unfair and unsubstantiated.

But what we *do* know from the bits and pieces we *do* have, is that this Mary came to Jesus and personally experienced his healing power. She was broken. Jesus made her whole and she spent the rest of her life serving him. This is the Woman who came to Jesus and never left.

Seems to me that the healing power of Jesus is something that we desperately need --- not just as individuals --- but in virtually every part of our shared lives. Certainly we need healing in our churches, in our denomination and in The Church. The brokenness of the church weakens our witness to the God who brings wholeness and health. We need a healing. Certainly we need healing in our nation. In my lifetime, there has never been greater division, downright hatred and violent disagreement. We need a healing. But good news ... our God is in the business of healing --- always has been. That's something we can learn from the woman from Magdala --- the one who came to Jesus and stayed.

CHANGE

In the very first session, I talked a bit about the transformative word of God. When we open ourselves --- heart and soul --- to God's word, we will be changed. Not everyone likes that. You know the old saying ... the only one who likes change is a baby with a dirty diaper and even he's not always so sure about it. Most of us resist change which means

most of us resist the transformative power of God's word. But Mary met Jesus and was changed. The same thing will happen to us when we truly come to Jesus. We are not sure what Mary's life was like in her home town of Magdala but we know that after her healing, her life changed. She walked away from Magdala and started walking with Jesus. Life with Jesus brings change. That's one thing we can learn from this Mary. You know --- the one who came to Jesus and stayed. What else?

SUPPORTED JESUS WITH RESOURCES

So what else do we know about this early follower of Jesus? Let's go back to that text from Luke.

ON SCREEN

Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many **OTHERS**, who provided for them out of their means.

I always refer to this group as the first UMW unit. Understand what Luke is saying here. Women financed the ministry of Jesus. See that final "others" in the text, right before "who provided for them" --- you can't see this in English but "others" is feminine in the Greek. The women provided the financial resources that kept Jesus' ministry going. Somebody had to pay for all that wandering around. There was lodging and food, at the very least, to pay for. How did they do it? We don't

know for sure but I think a careful look at the literal Greek may give us a clue. That last line “*who provided for them out of their means*” would literally be translated this way.

ON SCREEN

who took care of them by means of their possessions.

Now of course, I don't know this for certain. That's all the specific information we have. But I think that could mean that the women sold their possessions in order to have the needed resources. Do you remember what Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler he needed to do? Sell what you have, give it to the poor and come and follow me. Well, I think these women sold what they had and gave it to Jesus. And according to Luke, there were many such women in the traveling group. Mary, named first and most often, was undoubtedly their leader.

You know friends, our material blessings often become our material burdens. It just happens. It's not easy to keep up and maintain so many things. Those who follow Jesus may be asked to *eliminate* some of those material blessings so that they can serve Jesus more effectively. At the very least, we will be asked to *use* all our material blessings to serve the Kingdom. Sometimes that means having fewer possessions so we can give more to Kingdom work. Sometimes that means leveraging our possessions so that we use them for Kingdom work.

I experienced this while serving in England. The first year we were there, we just had one car. That's all we needed. I was the only one working at the time, the schools were in walking distance, my office was in the manse so we could manage fine on one car. But the second year, my husband starting serving a couple of churches. At times we would both need a car. Hearing about that, a young pastor on the circuit made a suggestion. His wife had just had a baby and was not going to teach that year. Could the four of us manage on three cars? And we did. Rarely have I experienced that kind of leveraging of possessions for Kingdom work. But apparently, that's what these women did who traveled with Jesus and --- Mary led the way. We might be asked to do the same thing. It's something we can learn from Mary. You know – the woman who came to Jesus and stayed.

AT THE CROSS

Now the next time Mary shows up, by name, is at the cross. Matthew and Mark include her in the women who watch from afar.

ON SCREEN

Matthew 27:

⁵⁵ There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

But the Gospel of John is explicit. Mary is at the foot of the cross.

ON SCREEN

John 19

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Mary is the consistent presence. She'd been with Jesus on the road when things were good. And.... She's with him when things are far from good. That's the real test of faith you know --- hanging on during the tough times. Those who come to Jesus do not wake up to discover the difficulties of life have been removed. Far from it. And nothing in scripture would even suggest such a thing. Life will be difficult at times. We shouldn't be the least bit surprised. After all, the cross looms large at the center of our shared faith. None of the followers understood what God was doing at the cross --- not in that moment. Many scattered. They ran. But Mary would not leave Jesus. You know, friends, seems to me the same should be said for every committed follower of Jesus. Even when we don't understand, even when we are confused, even when it is all painful and disappointing, we need to stick with Jesus. We need to stick with Jesus and we need to stick with each other. Mary did it and at one time or another, we will probably have to make that choice too. I did. In the most difficult days of my life, I had to choose to stay with Jesus or walk away in disappoint and despair. When my older son was killed, the church immediately released me from all responsibilities. But But in those next two months, I had to decide. Could I go back into the ministry. Could I go back to that church where Wade had been part of the praise team, helped out with the youth? Could I get up and tell

people God is good --- all the time? I wasn't sure. But, to be perfectly honest ... I had to work ... and I couldn't think of anything else I could do. So I tried. I remember sitting in that office every morning wondering if I could make it through one more day, missing the person I used to be. I received so many books and articles from well intentioned people that they hoped would help me process my grief. I would start them but never got far. That's when I told God simply this. I have given my entire life to you and to your word and if you have anything at all to say to me, any help to give me, this give it to me through this. So, I went to concordances and I made a list of every scripture that dealt with death and grief. I began working through those scriptures one by one every morning. It took me 9 months. But ... I did not leave. I stayed. There was a small hallway that connected my office with my associate and friend's office --- Susan Norman Vickers. Periodically, the door to that hallway would open and Jesus would peek in. Every time I sent him away. I wasn't ready for him to get too close. Then one day ... about six months in, I realized Jesus was sitting in one of the chairs beside me. And I began to find my way back to who I was and who I was called to be among the people I was called to be with. Even when we don't understand, even when we are confused, even when it is all painful and disappointing, we need to stick with Jesus. We need to stick to Jesus and we need to stick to each other. That's one thing we can learn from Mary. You know the one who came to Jesus and stayed.

AT THE TOMB

But the most detailed account of Mary and her faithfulness is yet to come. The Gospel writer tells us of a remarkable encounter Mary has with the resurrected Jesus. And we learn there why it is so important to hang on through the tough times. You see ---that kind of faithfulness means you will be there for the times of great blessing too.

First a couple of verses from John 19 ... when the Gospel writer confirms Mary's presence in the difficult moments.

ON SCREEN

John 19:25

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

And then in John 20.

ON SCREEN

John 20:1-2

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!"

Then John and Peter run to the tomb ... see the discarded graveclothes and leave. But not Mary. No surprise. After all – she's the one who came to Jesus and stayed. Picking up at verse 11.

ON SCREEN

John 20

¹¹ Now 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 He asked her, "Woman, 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." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Always Mary is with Jesus. On the road, at the cross, in the Garden.

Others scatter. But always Mary is with Jesus. And because of that faithfulness, she is the first to see the resurrected Lord, and the first to share the good news with others. Oh friends don't you see? There will be difficulty in the midst of our faithfulness but there will be great, great blessing too. But only if we, like Mary, come to Jesus and stay.

It's been almost 40 years ago now and it was a little unusual at the time ... but my mother was with me when my first child Wade was born. It wasn't really planned that way. But at the little mountain hospital, I was the only patient in the maternity ward so they let Mama stay. When I had to be taken into an operating room for a little extra help, they let her stand at the door where I could still see and hear her. Then, because of some other complications, Mama held Wade for the first 30 minutes of his life. I wish you could have heard her telling Daddy about it. You would have thought she was the one who gave birth. *We have really*

been through something here. Let me tell you. This is one amazing thing. You see when my mother gave birth to me and to my brother, they knocked her out. She didn't remember any of it. So, Wade's birth was in many ways the first birth she witnessed. And what a bond they always had. There will be difficulty in the midst of our faithfulness but there will be blessing too IF we will just stay. That's something we can learn from Mary. You know the one who came to Jesus --- and stayed.

CONCLUSION

Friend. Maybe you are smack dab in the middle of the difficulty, the pain, the frustration, the disappointment, the fear, the anger that is at one time or another part of every faith journey. And maybe you are wondering if it's time to give up, to let go, to turn back or turn away. Listen to me. Don't do it. Hang on ... hang on to Jesus. Whether in admiration, confusion or derision, let others look at you and say what we've said about Mary.

- Always she was with Jesus.
- She came to Jesus and she just stayed.

Do it. Just hang in there. No matter what choices others around you make, you come to Jesus and you stay. Listen to me now. If you remember nothing else I have said in our time together, I want you to hear this. Coming to Jesus AND staying there is the only way any of us can make it to the promise of the empty tomb and the power of the resurrection. We can't just be women who come to Jesus, Beloved. We

have to be the women who come to Jesus and stay. *In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*