

## INTRODUCTION

There's something exciting about a countdown. As a boy growing up in LA, lower Alabama, I can remember my family crowded around a small black-and-white television set as the camera was focused on a launch pad in Cape Canaveral, Florida. The year was 1962 and Astronaut John Glenn was strapped in a tiny Mercury capsule on top of a huge rocket. He was poised to become the first American to orbit the earth. The NASA engineer said, "We are T-minus ten seconds and counting. 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1- zero. Ignition, liftoff." Then as the rocket began to climb, a normally reserved Walter Cronkite said, "Go baby!"

Over the past six weeks, we've been studying the most important countdown of history—the final 94 hours that led to the empty tomb. These are 94 hours that changed the world. Our countdown started at R-minus 94 hours. We followed Jesus through the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane, and then we examined His trial and torture. He hung on the cross six hours, and then He died. His body was lovingly removed from the cross and placed in a tomb. He was there for three days and three nights. Then on the first Easter Sunday morning, the countdown continued: R-minus five seconds and counting. 4-3-2-1-zero. Ignition! Lift off! He is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. In Matthew 12, the Jewish leaders asked Him to give them some kind of sign that He was the Son of God. They wanted a miracle on the spot to prove His divinity. He said, "Okay, you want a sign? Here's your sign. It's the sign of Jonah. He said, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign. But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:39-40)

The rebellious prophet, Jonah, was practically dead in the belly of that fish. But then he got right with God and God directed the fish to spit Jonah out on the shore. I can imagine that Jonah hit the ground running to Nineveh. Jesus predicted that after His death, He would spend the same amount of time in the grave. But then God would blast Him out of the tomb – alive! But He would be more alive than Jonah – Jonah eventually died, but Jesus came forth alive forevermore.

All four Gospel writers describe the resurrection morning, and each one provides different details. Let's read John's account starting in John 20:1, "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. 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!" (Notice, she didn't yet believe Jesus had risen from the dead, she thought His body had been taken. Then John and Peter ran to the tomb and looked inside, and they were confused as well.) Let's pick up the text at John 20:10, Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 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."

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 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.

I'm going to name four characters from a television show and then I'm going to ask you to name the show. Ready? Bert and Ernie; The Cookie Monster; and Kermit the Frog. (Sesame Street, right!) Those were Muppets, but one of the earliest human characters on the show was a man named Mr. Hooper. Do any of you remember him? His name was Will Lee and he was on Sesame Street for thirteen years before he died of a heart attack in 1982. The producers were faced with a dilemma. How were they going to explain death to the 10 million children who watched the show? They could have just concocted a story about Mr. Hooper retiring to Florida, but instead they decided to tell the children he died. But because this was public television, they didn't want to mention anything religious or spiritual.

So on the day of the show Big Bird walks out and says he has a drawing to give Mr. Hooper and says, "I can't wait to see Mr. Hooper again." Then they said, "Remember Big Bird, we told you that Mr. Hooper died." Big Bird said, "Oh yeah, I forgot. Well, I'll give it to him when he gets back." One of the staff members puts their arms around Big Bird and says, "Big Bird, Mr. Hooper isn't coming back." "Why not?" Big Bird asks innocently. And the final line was, "Big Bird, when people die, they don't come back."

The gospel of Sesame Street isn't good news at all. What a sad message to teach children: "When people die, they don't come back." But that's not the message of Easter. The good news of Easter is because Jesus came back from death, that we, too, will live after death.

Mary Magdalene was one of the eyewitnesses of the resurrection. She was the last one at the cross and the first one at the tomb. She had to answer three Easter Questions that day, and these are the same three questions each of us must answer today.

### **1. EASTER SORROW: "Why are you crying?"**

After the two disciples returned home, Mary ventured a look inside the dark tomb and she saw a couple of angels. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" You can tell these angels never took a course in Christian counseling because you're never supposed to just ask WHY someone is crying. The question "Why" is too threatening and not supportive enough. It's like when a husband asks his wife, "WHY are you crying?" And then he doesn't understand why that question makes her cry even more! Not too many husbands have been trained in Christian counseling either!

To her credit, Mary didn't respond to the angel by saying, "How dare you ask me that question? Can't you see what I'm going through?" Instead she simply responds, "They've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they've laid him."

Then Mary turned around and saw a man that she assumed was the gardener. That makes sense because the Bible says that the tomb was carved out of a limestone cliff inside a garden. We also know this tomb belonged to Joseph of Aramathea, a wealthy man who was a secret follower of Jesus. It was a new tomb in which no corpse had ever been placed.

This stranger asked the same questions the angels had asked, "Woman, why are you crying?" The term "woman" isn't rude. It would be like us asking, "Ma'am, why are you crying?"

The angels asked the question out of curiosity. They probably thought, "This earth creature should know that Jesus is alive, so why is she crying?" But Jesus asked the question out of compassion. He loved Mary and His heart was moved by her tears, "Why are you crying?" He knew the answer, but He wanted her to say it. And she answered honestly, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where He is." She didn't say, "Nothing. I'm fine, really."

That's a question Jesus is asking you today. "Why are YOU crying?" And you need to be honest with Him. Don't just sniff and say, "Nothing. I'm really okay." He already knows why you're crying; He just wants you to admit the point of your pain.

There could be as many different answers to that question as there are people present today. Even for those of us who know the Lord, tears are a part of our existence. As Horatio Spafford penned in his famous hymn, "Sorrows, like sea billows roll."

What are you going through right now that is causing you pain and sorrow? Mary isn't the only one who has stood in a cemetery while battling tears. You may still be stinging from the death of a loved one. You may be hurting because of a recent diagnosis you or someone you love has just gotten. Your eyes may be filled with tears because of problems with your children. The list is endless. But Jesus sees your pain and He cares about your pain. The Bible says that He is our High Priest who is touched by the feelings of our weakness.

None of us are immune from tears. Thirteen years ago this month we occupied this beautiful Worship Center to the glory of God. Our members had given sacrificially and we basically entered it with no debt. It was a great time of rejoicing. But what should have been one of the greatest joys of my life was actually a time of great sorrow and despair for my wife and me. It was during this time that our youngest daughter, Laura Grace, was struggling in the deepest depths of clinical depression. What might have been one of the greatest seasons of joy for me was one of the deepest periods of pain I ever faced. We never kept it a secret, and I know hundreds of you have prayed for Laura Grace. She is doing better, and we continue pray for her every day. I know many of you struggle with depression or you have loved ones who struggle with it. The point I'm trying to make is that tears come to all of us, and when Jesus asks, "Why are you crying?" It's time to take off the mask and honestly admit your point of pain. Only then can you move on to accept healing. When you do, then you're ready to experience God's

promise found in Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

We learn our greatest lessons during times of sorrow. A poem that I often quote says, "I walked a mile with laughter; she chatted all the way. But I was none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow, and not a word said she. But oh, the things I learned when sorrow walked with me."

## **2. EASTER SEEKING: "Who/what are you looking for?"**

The next question Jesus asked was, "Who are you looking for?" I know that should be "whom" but we'll use East Texan vernacular. When Jesus asked Mary, her answer showed the deep love she had for Jesus. She still didn't recognize Jesus. She thought he was the gardener so she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, please show me where you put him and I will get him." That's love. Maybe Mary weighed 110 pounds. Let's assume Jesus weighed 165, and John tells us that Nicodemus and Joseph had wrapped His body in 75 additional pounds of aloe and spices. So this little woman was going to heft his 250 pound corpse over her shoulder and carry it back inside the tomb. That's love. Her hope was shattered, and her faith was absent, but the love was still there. And remember, among faith, hope, and love, that the greatest of these is love.

At that point Jesus couldn't conceal Himself any longer. He simply spoke her name. In Aramaic, He said, "Miriam." And she fell at His feet and answered His second question. "Who are you looking for?" She was looking for Jesus; and she had found Him.

Jesus knows your name, too. He knows everything about you. You could easily imagine Him calling your name right now and asking, "[YOUR NAME], Who or what are you looking for?" What is your goal in life? Everybody is looking for someone or something. They're searching for truth, or purpose that one secret that will make their life better.

One of the great lines from the movie *City Slickers* is where Jack Palance says to Billy Crystal: "Do you know what the secret of life is?" He holds up one finger. "This." Billy Crystal says, "Your finger?" Curly says, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean bleep." He rides off and Billy shouts, "But what is the 'one thing'?" Curley says, "That's what YOU have to find out."

Everybody is looking for the newest, the biggest, and the greatest next big thing. They think life is all about accumulating more and more wealth. Or they think life is all about experiencing the greatest thrills. Many people spend their entire lives scrambling up the ladder to success only to get to the top and realize it is leaning against the wrong wall.

Solomon, the wisest man besides Jesus, once wrote, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12) Mary knew what the "one thing" was: Jesus. In Luke 10 Jesus is at the home of another Mary and her sister Martha. He says to a frantic, angry Martha, "You are worried and anxious about many things, but Mary has found the ONE THING that won't be taken from her." (Luke 10:42) Mary had been seated at the feet of Jesus listening to Him. A relationship with Jesus is the ONE THING that will give your life meaning.

Many of us came to Christ from a Christian family. It was neat, clean, and logical. But even for people who come from a messy past, Jesus is the answer. Mary Magdalene had battled seven demonic appetites and Jesus changed her.

I recently read the testimony of a writer named Anne Lamott. In her book, *Grace (Eventually)*, she says she didn't come to Christ by a leap of faith; instead it involved several misguided stagers to God. Here's part of her testimony:

"On the seventh night after my abortion, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily...I thought I should call a doctor...but I was so disgusted that I had gotten so drunk one week after my abortion that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help. I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill.

After a while as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner...the feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant, hilarious progressive friends. I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'

I felt Him just sitting there watching me with patience and love. I squeezed my eyes shut but it didn't help because it wasn't my eyes that were seeing Him. I finally fell asleep and in the morning He was gone.

The experience spooked me badly and everywhere I went I felt as if there was a little cat following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up. Wanting me to open the door and let it in. And when you let a cat in and feed it a little milk, it stays forever.

One week later, I went to church. I was so hung over I couldn't stand for the songs. This time I stayed for the sermon. I thought it was ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. I felt as though the presence of God was washing over me. I began to cry. I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels. I opened the door of my house and I stood there for one long minute, and then I hung my head and said: 'I quit.' I took a deep long breath and said out loud, 'All right, You can come in.'

She found whom and what she was looking for. Have you?

### **3. EASTER SURRENDER: Will you fall before Jesus as your living Lord?**

Jesus couldn't conceal His identity any longer. When He saw the love Mary professed, He simply spoke her name. "Mary." In Aramaic, He would have said, "Miriam." When she heard her name spoken by Jesus, Mary realized it was the Lord, her despair was turned to delight and she could only utter one word, "Rabboni." The word literally means "Master." She was declaring that Jesus was her Master. And then she fell at his feet and began to worship Him. That's why Jesus said, "Don't hold onto me." He had something for her to do. He said, "Go tell my disciples that I'm alive."

This scenario is confirmed when you combine all the four gospel accounts. We learn that Mary Magdalene wasn't alone that morning. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus was there as well. The Bible says "So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him." (Matthew 28:8-9)

Have you fallen on your knees and declared that Jesus is your Lord? You may consider yourself a skeptic. There was a skeptic among the disciples. On that first Easter evening Jesus showed up among the disciples, but Thomas was missing. When he returned they told him the good news—that Jesus was alive. But Thomas was a skeptic. He said, "Yeah! Right! I won't believe that story until I can place my fingers in the nail prints in His hands." Be careful what you ask for, Thomas because one week later, boom! Jesus showed up again.

One of my favorite paintings is this scene done by Caravaggio. It's as if Jesus is pulling Thomas' arm toward the gaping wound in His side. But we know what happened because the Bible says, "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20:26-28) Would you make the same confession? Will you fall before the Lord and confess Him as your living Lord?

## CONCLUSION

There was Easter Sorrow followed by Easter Seeking that led to Easter Surrender. Here's another Easter question for you to consider. Do you know for certain you will go to heaven when you die? Most people believe if you are good enough that you can earn your way to heaven. Just this past week, the former Mayor of NYC, *the New York Times* was interviewing Michael Bloomberg. He was talking about all the work he has done for gun control and to battle obesity. Then he made this statement: "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close." When I read those words I cringed. Because one of Satan's most popular lies is that you can be good enough to earn your way to heaven. There is only one way to heaven, and that is when you fall before Jesus and confess Him as your living Lord. The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Why doesn't the Bible say, "Confess that Jesus is Lord and believe He fed the 5,000?" Or "Confess Jesus is Lord and believe that He walked on water?" It's because the resurrection isn't just a miracle. It is the THE SIGN that verifies that Jesus is really who He claimed to be.

I recently heard a Muslim who had become a Christian share his testimony. He said, "I was looking at the lives of both Mohammed and Jesus. Then I came to a fork in the road. One led to death and a tomb in Medina. The other led to an empty tomb and a resurrection. I decided to follow the living way."

Before the end of his life Mohammed wrote in the Qur'an, "I don't know where I'm going." In SURAH 46:9, Mohammed wrote, "I am not something original among the messengers, nor do I know what will be done with me or with you."

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you ... I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:2-4) The choice is simple. Choose the living way.

A few years ago, some missionaries in Bangladesh were showing the "Jesus Film" to several hundred villagers. None of them knew the story of Jesus. They sat there enthralled with the life of Jesus. But as the torture and crucifixion of Jesus ensued, there were tears, and gasps, and people were yelling in response to the treatment Jesus was suffering. There was chaos among the crowd as Jesus was being tortured. Suddenly, a young man jumped up and screamed, "Do not be afraid. He gets up again! I saw it before!"

That's our Easter message: "I've seen the Lord! He gets up again! Do not be afraid!"

Mohammed was wrong. Sesame Street was wrong. People do come back and get up after they die. That's why we can sing, "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all fear is gone. Because I know He hold my future. And life IS worth the living just because He lives!"

## OUTLINE

### 1. EASTER SORROW: "Why are you crying?"

"Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." *Psalms 30:5*

### 2. EASTER SEEKING: "Who/what are you looking for?"

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." *Proverbs 14:12*

### 3. EASTER SURRENDER: Will you fall before Jesus as your living Lord?

"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him." *Matthew 28:8-9*

"A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" *John 20:26-28*

"I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close." When I read those words I cringed. Because one of Satan's most popular lies is that you can be good enough to earn your way to heaven. There is only one way to heaven, and that is when you fall before Jesus and confess Him as your living Lord. The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." *Romans 10:9*



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes



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