

## *Unconnected and Unable to Love*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on Easter, (12 April), 2009.*

The seventh in the Lenten sermon series on Love.

Text: John 20:9

“...[A]s yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

If a loving relationship to God is well established in your life, all sorts of things are possible in the rest of your life and in your other relationships. When you are unconnected from God, much in your life becomes confused and disoriented. This is what I see in Mary Magdalene prior to her discovery Easter morning near the empty tomb of Jesus. This is a story about love—the love of God for us and the way to infuse our lives with the same love for others. We have looked at the love theme in scripture during Lent and here it is again. John wrote,

God’s love is revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.<sup>1</sup>

Given the emphasis on love in John’s gospel, we should not be surprised also to see the theme pervades his account of the resurrection.

John reported Mary Magdalene was first to go to the tomb and found the stone had been rolled away.<sup>2</sup> She peered in and saw the body was missing.<sup>3</sup> She ran to tell Peter and John and the three came running to the tomb. When the two men looked into the cave, John says, “Simon Peter ... went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.”<sup>4</sup> The reason this is odd is clearer in the Greek manuscripts. The wording implies that the cloths in which the body had been wrapped laid where they had covered the body, as if the body just disappeared

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<sup>1</sup> 1John 4:9-12.

<sup>2</sup> The other gospels report that Mary Magdalene was accompanied to the tomb before dawn by additional women: “the other Mary” (Matthew 28:1), “Mary the mother of James and Salome” (Mark 16:1), and “Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women” (Luke 24:10).

<sup>3</sup> John 20:2. Since she reports to Peter that the body was missing, one presumes she did more than just notice the stone was missing. She must have peered into the grave.

<sup>4</sup> John 20:6-7.

and the cloths fell on the stone by themselves. Moreover, the head covering was neatly rolled up on the side. Much has been made of this description, in retrospect. Had grave robbers taken the body, they probably would have not left the cloths like this, but thrown them to the side quickly. But everything was too confusing to make sense to the three early that morning.

The men went back to Jerusalem to tell the others, but Mary remained, weeping. This is the striking emotional center of the story. As she wept she found someone else was with her in the garden, a man she assumed was a worker. She asked him what she had been thinking, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”<sup>5</sup> At last, she thought she had found an explanation for why the body was missing. The gardener, for unknown reasons, had moved the body temporarily. But when the man said her name in just the inflection of his voice—*Mary*—she knew this was no gardener. He was Jesus. He lived and here they were, together again.

Prior to this moment she was in shock and grieving. She had no idea what to do, where to turn, what would happen next. The gospel pictures her as confused, unconnected, disoriented, uncertain. When she realized Jesus was again alive and with her, she reached out to grab him, a human gesture of love. It is odd what happened next. He told her not to hold onto him and then something confusing about his ascension.<sup>6</sup> I suspect this meant that though he was alive again, things were now different and she would not be able to return to what they were. What strikes me about the story, however, is contrast between the moment before and the moment after her recognition. Unconnected with Jesus, she was afraid, unable to love. As soon as she realized his death had not taken him away from her, as soon as she was connected again with him, she reached out. When she thought death separated them, she did not know what to do. Everything seemed on hold, stalled. When he came back to her, suddenly everything looked different. Rick Warren says, “*The quality of your relationship to God determines the quality of all your other relationships.*” In this story at the tomb, Mary demonstrates the power of that statement. After an experience of the love of God, love will become possible in the rest of your life.

John said, “*We love because he first loved us.*”<sup>7</sup> Without the knowledge that God loved us and that God’s love will work through us to love others, love is indeed a daunting task. We are afraid that we will fail; afraid we will not be strong enough; afraid others will reject us. But, as John also taught, “*there is no fear in love, [for] perfect love casts out fear.*”<sup>8</sup> We may be unable to love others when we are disconnected from God, but when we find the Lord or when the Lord finds us, things look different.

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:15b.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:17.

<sup>7</sup> 1John 4:19.

<sup>8</sup> 1John 4:18.

So often in Jesus' encounters in the world, the first response was fear. We remember those shepherds on the hillside the night he was born. They were afraid of what they saw and heard.<sup>9</sup> Fear is the most common emotion in the world with all its terrors, disappointments, troubles. Even our encounters with the gods are filled with fear of judgment, punishment and rejection. That is, until we find a loving God in the face of Christ. When we experience the love of God in life, fear retreats. If you are stumbling in the dark, afraid of the future, fearful about what swirls around you today, I encourage you to seek God. Get to know God in Christ, the one whom even death cannot take away. In contact with him, love will seem possible and fear will disappear. The disciples hid during and after the crucifixion. They were scared, afraid, unsure what to do or where to turn. In the days immediately following the crucifixion they were even uncertain about the truth of what Jesus had taught them, whether love worked in the real world. In a moment, after he rose from the dead, a new perspective dawned on them. He was still with them—*always*, he said<sup>10</sup>—and his loving ways are indeed the way to live.

If a loving relationship to God is well established in your life, all sorts of things are possible in the rest of your life and in your other relationships. When you are unconnected from God, much in your life becomes confused and disoriented. This is what I see in Mary Magdalene prior to her discovery Easter morning near the empty tomb of Jesus. This is a story about love—the love of God for each of us and the way to infuse our lives with the same love for others. With Jesus, something new comes into the world. Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek? What if Jesus is still here? “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,”<sup>11</sup> Jesus said. “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, but not as the world gives.” Let love fill your lives: love that is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not irritable or resentful, a love that rejoices in the truth, that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things, a love that never ends.<sup>12</sup> It is this kind of love that God showed us when he sent Christ to us. Though the world rejected him, he keeps returning. Right now, he is here among us. Why are you afraid? Know that he loves you and in his power you can love as he has loved you. Believe, and believing, grasp life in his name.

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 2:10.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>11</sup> John 14:27

<sup>12</sup> 1Corinthians 13:4-8.