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the SAVIOUR

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“Redeeming Doubt: Mary”

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John 20:19-29

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¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This sermon is part of a three-part series on the story of the post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. The three sermons are designed to be monologues told from the perspectives of John, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. As such, this manuscript is only a guide – what is shared in worship will be more free-flowing and improvisational.

Why didn't they believe me? Why was it that they could not take me for my word? I was not telling just an “idle tale.” What was to gain in making up lies? Why would I lie about Jesus' body being taken from the tomb? Even further, why would I lie about seeing him, risen and alive?

Jesus means everything to me. He changed my life, you know. I was born and raised in Magdala, a large city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Magdala was known for its salt trade, so you will excuse me if I'm feeling a little salty about how everything happened. A few years ago, we started hearing word around Galilee about this man who was healing, performing miracles, preaching, and teaching. He was doing these things with such authority, like no one else. He was ruffling a lot of feathers but also seemed to be doing a lot of good. Some thought he was a prophet but I could just sense that this man was more than that.

After hearing of all the miracles, healings, and even the casting out of demons, I started to get my hopes up about him. You see, I myself was really struggling. I was greatly afflicted; with demons you might say. Whatever the source, I was in desperate need of help and relief. I could not sleep. People thought I was crazy. I just could not shake whatever was going on inside of me and it was affecting everything.

I discovered that his name was Jesus. Well, technically he went by Yeshua but I realize you know him as Jesus. Yeshua means salvation and I was hoping that he could save me from this deep affliction. So when I heard that he was coming towards our part of Galilee, I knew that I had to find him. Maybe he could help me. I went to the city center every day in the hopes that I would meet him. Day after day I went and waited.

Just when it seemed like my hopes would be dashed, he was there in my city. He had a group of twelve men with him, along with several others. They seemed like ordinary people. It makes me smile thinking of them and how we met. They seemed protective of Jesus but Jesus did his own thing regardless of what they thought. I mustered up my courage and approached the group. I humbly went up to Jesus, recognizing that he had power and authority that I did not. He did not have to heal me, but would he? I reverently bowed before him and said “My Lord, I am deeply afflicted. I cannot sleep, I can barely eat, and I feel like an outsider. Please help me.” I looked up and saw him looking at me with compassion in his eyes. He extended his hand to me and asked, “What is your name?”

“Mary,” I replied.

Before he could respond, the spirits that had been afflicting me shouted, “What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

“Be silent!” Jesus responded. “Come out of her!”

As soon as that command came out of Jesus’ mouth, I could feel an immediate difference. It was as if the affliction, these spirits were sucked right out and vanished. I felt a lightness, a peace I had not experienced in years. I fell at his feet, crying in gratitude and relief. He bent down and lifted me up. “Mary,” he said. “You have shown much faith.”

He continued ministering to the rest of the crowd. I was absolutely awestruck by him and I knew that I wanted to be part of this. I wanted to help him help others. I considered myself fortunate for the resources and finances I had, unusual for most women in my time. I decided that I would follow this Jesus and support him however I could. There were other women in the crowd that day who Jesus healed, particularly Chuza and Susanna. We all decided that we would provide for Jesus and his disciples out of our resources. I decided that I would travel with him, learning from him.

We all experienced so much together. There were so many wonderful moments and lives changed because of Jesus. But he was starting to attract negative attention. The religious leaders and scribes kept trying to trap him with questions but Jesus always outwitted them. I could tell they were getting angry, feeling threatened. I worried for Jesus’ safety, but he had a clear sense of what he was here to do.

Finally, as the Passover approached, we made our way to Jerusalem. Jesus kept saying that he would be handed over and condemned to death, that he would be treated in all sorts of terrible ways and be killed. But the kicker is that he said he would rise again after three days. The being killed part did not seem all that unreasonable because he had been making lots of people angry. But rising again? Coming back to life? I mean, Jesus said a lot of wild and unbelievable things, but he was always true to his word. He did raise Lazarus back to life, so maybe it was possible. But how?

Things started out well in Jerusalem, but things took a turn for the worse. I was not with Jesus and his twelve disciples at that last meal they shared, and I did not experience much of that evening firsthand. After Jesus was arrested, John ran to tell us everything that had happened. He wanted to get back there so he did not linger. I rushed to find all the women that I could. We had supported him all throughout his ministry and he needed our support now. One of the disciples had told Mary, his mother, what was happening.

Things moved really quickly. The next thing I knew, Jesus was carrying a cross to a place called Golgotha. He looked absolutely terrible, horribly wounded. My heart broke over seeing him suffer and stumble under the weight of the cross upon his shoulders. My insides screamed at the mocking and the taunting. He did not deserve any of that. No one deserves any of that cruelty. Finally, he made his way to the place his cross would stand. I will spare you the gruesome details of what happened next. I found myself wanting to look away and yet not wanting to look away. He was in so much pain. I remember looking over to his mother, Mary, tears streaming down her face, and she wailed for him. The pain of a mother losing their child.

Most of us at the cross were the women, consequently most of us named Mary, but John was there, too. Where were the others? Were they so afraid for their own lives that they would not be here with him? I was afraid, too, but I was not going to leave him.

There is the moment when you know someone has breathed their last breath. He bowed his head and it was all over. I felt relieved that his pain and suffering had ended but I immediately felt the pain of grief and loss. Jesus was really dead. My Lord and Savior, gone. They took his body down from the cross and Joseph of Arimathea asked permission to take his body. Nicodemus was there, too, bringing myrrh and aloes. They took his body and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths. Joseph found a tomb nearby that no one had ever been laid in, so they laid Jesus to rest there. I saw him lay Jesus in the tomb and roll the stone to seal it. That felt like the end.

I had to wait until the sabbath day was over to go to the garden and see the tomb. I could not sleep, so I went as early as I could. It was still dark as I quickly and quietly made my way to the tomb. As I approached the tomb, something seemed wrong. I could not quite make it out until I got to the tomb and realized it was wide open with the stone removed and his body was missing. I could not believe my eyes! A small shriek escaped me as I quickly turned and ran toward the place where Peter and John were staying. I ran the whole way and was out of breath when I arrived. They must have thought I was losing my mind. "Why are you here? Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"The stone... has been rolled away... from the tomb... his body is gone!"

"What?!"

John and Peter ran out the door and raced to the tomb. I paused to catch my breath and then ran after them. By the time I arrived they both were coming out of the tomb. I could tell that they obviously believed what I said, having seen the empty tomb. But then they started to walk away. "Wait, you're leaving?"

"Mary, what can we do? His body is gone and we do not know where it is. What is the point in sticking around? Mary, there could be people waiting to trap us and pin this on us. It isn't safe here. We know you have questions, we all do. Please come back with us."

I shook my head. I was not going to leave. Besides, I didn't want answers. I wanted Jesus. Haven't you ever lost a loved one? Sure, there were questions but above all, I just wanted Jesus back. I wanted to be there. I wasn't going to leave the place I saw him last, especially now that his tomb was empty. I was afraid, yes, but hopeful. Maybe all that he said was true. I just needed to linger there a while longer. I thought that if I sought the Lord with all my heart, I would find him. I watched them walk away, leaving me alone in the garden. Or so I thought.

I was so confused, hurt, and sad. I started to cry. I decided to look inside the tomb once more just in case it was all a trick. Much to my surprise, inside the tomb were two angels sitting where Jesus had laid. Frankly, they had the audacity to ask why I was crying, as if I really needed a reason. I said "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where he is." After saying this I turned around. Maybe I was going to go back with John and Peter. I did not see them, so they must have gone quickly. Instead, I saw a man who I assumed was the gardener. Maybe he could help me figure all of this out. He asked me why I was weeping and who I was looking for. I said to him, "if you are the one who took his body away, please let me know where it is and I will take him away." I really had no plan in place but I would figure it out as I went.

Just then he said "Mary," and memories flooded my mind. I recognized that voice in an instant. I remembered the first time he spoke my name, when he healed me. I remembered the new life that brought me, the hope it provided. Hope came surging back and I turned to face him and said "Teacher!" I ran to hug him, just to touch him once more. He told me not to, that he had not yet ascended to the Father. Odd, but okay. Instead, he told me to go to the disciples and let them know he would ascend. I did not want to leave him but something about the look in his eyes let me know it would all be okay.

I ran back to where the disciples were hiding. “Let me in!” I whisper-shouted. Once they unlocked the door, I burst through it and shared the good news. “I have seen the Lord!”

“What are you talking about? You have seen Jesus?”

“Yes, he appeared to me in the garden and told me to come here and tell you!”

John and Peter, just having been there themselves, especially could not believe it. “There is no way you saw him in the garden. We were just there.”

“But I did! He is alive, just like he said!” Murmurs started going around the room as everyone else started piecing together what Jesus had told us.

“Maybe it is true. He did say that he would rise again.”

I’m not going to lie, I was hurt that they did not believe me. I know it was an impossible thing to believe, but who are they to question me, when I stayed true to Jesus the whole time? I did not desert him like many of the twelve did. I did not betray him.

About a week passed after that and we were all gathered again in the upper room. Things seemed to be quieting down but many of us were still afraid of what might happen. I was really missing Jesus, eager to see him again. I had hope that we would all see him. Just then, Jesus appeared in the room out of nowhere! I was so happy to see him again, and admittedly, felt a bit vindicated. Everyone gathered around him, saying “Lord, is it you?” He showed us his nail scarred hands and feet and nail pierced side. He spoke peace to us and he breathed on us, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” It felt like we all received new life that day. I am really sorry that Thomas was not there to experience it. I hope that he will have his opportunity to encounter Jesus. It was the confidence boost that we all needed and the reminder that our work is not done. Jesus changed our lives. It is our turn now to carry out his mission and purpose. It is my turn, and your turn.