

# *Real Faith*

**Based on John 20:1-18**  
**Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008**

**Introduction:** Friend at the pizza shop – “Jesus was a good moral teacher. And, okay, he was also really, really smart. End of story. Smart guy and good teacher. That’s Jesus.” I said, “Okay, is Jesus was so smart and such a great teacher why did he wind up on a cross? And why did he even say that it was his plan to be crucified for the sins of the world. You’d think a smart guy would know how to avoid getting killed.” “Hum,” the thought for a minute, “Hey, I know: Jesus died on the cross to get attention.” Really? “Yea, he was like all those guys who used to go bungee jumping off bridges to attract crowds but sometimes they pushed it too far and cracked their heads open. So Jesus pushed it too far and got his head cracked open. Hey, that’s my opinion. But Jesus was still a great moral teacher.” Now I’ve been in New York for seven years so I know how to talk New York so I should have said, “Buddy, I think you’re head is cracked.” I did say, “Hey, thanks for your opinion – even if it is dead wrong!”

You see, based on the NT one thing you can emphatically NOT say is, “Jesus was just a good moral teacher and a very smart guy.” As you read the stories of that first Easter, that’s not one of the options. Every story of the resurrection focuses on a personal encounter with Jesus. “We have seen the Lord.” (See 1 John 1:1-2). So they would say emphatically, “Either cast us off as crackpots or liars or join us, walk through that door called Jesus and enter a brand new world, but don’t give us this nonsense about Jesus the moral teacher.” No, it’s all about new life, a personal encounter with Jesus, what the Bible calls faith.

So what is faith? What does it mean to have a personal relationship with Jesus? What does faith look like in a real person? Well, in this story we have a model for personal faith – her name is Mary the Magdalene. As we’ll see she is one of the least likely, least qualified, most surprising examples of true faith. We wouldn’t pick her. What do we know about her? Read Luke 8:1-3. She was from Magdala – a luxury resort town, generally not a nice or moral place. She was fragmented, broken person with an imperfect background. So if you’re thinking this morning, “Yea, faith, church, Christianity that’s for the ‘good people’ and I’m not one of the good people,” get that thought out of your head right now. It doesn’t belong there. Shed it like an old snake skin. Or if you’re thinking, “I’m so relieved because I’m not one of those sinful, troubled people with broken, fragmented pasts so I’m a model of faith,” God might say to you, “Get away from me. I never knew you. I’ll take the Mary’s of the world – *and those who know they aren’t any better than the Mary’s of the world* - over you any day.”

So what does real faith look like in Mary’s life in this story?

**First, real faith is impossible.** That’s not very good news. Yes, it is wonderful news. It’s so freeing to know that faith doesn’t depend on you. You can’t crank it up by wishing or arguing or agonizing or organizing. Faith is not our gift to God; faith is a gift from God. Faith is like a windshield: as you’re driving down the road, you don’t

constantly look at it, you look through it. This makes a huge difference in how you approach your journey with Christ.

Notice Mary as an example. On the one hand, faith should have been so easy for her. She was with Jesus. She heard him. She watched him heal people. She walked with him and even smelled him. She knew his voice. But she even after spending three years with Jesus she couldn't come to faith on her own. She couldn't crank up faith.

For example, for three years Jesus kept saying two things: (1) I will die; (2) I will rise again. It was all so clear. You couldn't miss it. Now at John 20:1 we read ... Part 1 has happened according to plan – just as Jesus said. Okay, she should be thinking, “Okay, now Part 2 is coming. Just like he said, Jesus will rise again. Hurrah!” But that's not why she came to the tomb. She came to grieve the dead. She never expected a resurrection. And, as a matter of fact, she blows right by all the clues: an empty tomb, angels hanging around, even Jesus himself shows up – and she just ignores it all. Why? Because she was utterly locked into a world of unbelief. Just like us.

According to the Bible, faith isn't just hard; it's impossible – apart from the grace of God working in our lives. Why is that so? First of all, we have to understand that in the Bible our unbelief isn't just a neutral, empty thing; it is a solid substance. Unbelief is real and powerful. Some people say, “Yea, you have faith and that's good for you but I don't have faith and that works for me.” Now according to the Bible, that's not true. We all have faith in something – all the time. Many people have faith in human progress or the political process or faith in their jobs or faith in their families or faith in themselves. People have faith that they or other people are beyond redemption, faith that I can't change, faith that I am locked into karma or fate or whatever. Some people believe that they can run their own lives better than Jesus. That's faith. As a 16 year old, I had faith in God: I believed that God was out to ruin my life and if I surrendered to Jesus it would make me miserable. So I hated God. God just subtracted from life. I was always yelling and swearing at God. Is that faith? Absolutely.

Let me read you a strange verse from the NT – Matthew 11:16-17. What does that mean? Children are finicky. Many children are oppositional. So if you say, “Hey, let's go to a movie,” they might say, “Nah, I hate movies.” “Okay, let's stay home and have a pizza party with your friends.” “Nah, I hate my friends.” At times you realize the problem is not with the options; the problem is with control. You're child is saying, “I don't care what you suggest I don't want to do it just because you suggested it. I want to call the shots. I want to be in control.”

Jesus is saying that that's the fundamental problem with the human race. The human heart is a battlefield for control and we don't want to give up control to Jesus the Lord. No way! Some of you are fighting this battle right now. It's not really about all your intellectual questions or all the hypocrites at church: it's about control, and you don't want to give it up. As a matter of fact, you would rather be miserable, make others around you miserable, and spend eternity in hell apart from God than give up control.

According to the Bible, I make a lousy god. I make a great son through Jesus, but a lousy god.

How do we break this impasse of wanting control and not being able to believe? I ask for help. It's really that simple. We let go. We surrender to the one who loves us before we were even born, who loves us enough to die for us. We say, "Lord Jesus, I believe but help my unbelief. I can't let go. I have a fundamental need to be in control and I can't give it up. Help me." That's where we start – and then we keep saying that prayer every day. And if we stop saying it, if we think we're beyond that prayer, we slide back into being our own miserable little gods with faith in ourselves. It doesn't work. I've tried it – often. I always make a lousy, miserable and misery-making god. So look at Mary: she ignored the clues. She didn't come to faith on her own, but Jesus found her. Jesus was seeking her.

**Second, real faith is Personal.** We could also say it's intellectual. It passes through the mind. Preaching 20 years – believe = intellectual integrity. Message – astounding, risen, dead, alive, we will be too, new creation – saving world – so understated, ordinary. Not the way a NY writes this story: not hyped, understated.

- 1) No description of actual resurrection. If we had written it...(describe resurrection. They didn't even attempt. Why not? Didn't see it.
- 2) Detail so unnecessary to the story:
  - running – who cares?
  - linen cloths wrapped neatly – who cares?
  - Later 153 fish – who cares?

See = **there** – to reason & think things out. Faith includes a satisfied mind

But it's so much more than intellectual –

Believe = pistos → eis pistos = believe into something

Faith into Jesus. Notice Mary **vv** \_\_ \_\_. Not just intellect.

Passionately Personal (see Ephesians 3:17). Pastor Tim Keller tells the story his grandfather used to tell him – soldier during WWI – lived in trenches, crouch, stick head up, the other French blow your head off, crouch, one day radio announced: The war is over, truce, you can leave, always believed – had faith in trusted radio, Question: who would be fire to stick head up?

Not just faith in general – believing in Jesus. Stick my head up, stick my neck out – forgive, loved – stick my neck out to engage a hurting world around me.

Perhaps you've been in church, information, intellectual – cold, impersonal, "believing about" but not "believing into." How? You ask for it. God addresses you ...like Mary – by name, personally, passionately. We respond and call on His name. Romans 10:13.

**Third, Real Faith is alive and growing.** Never static, never a one-time shot. People view it like a vaccine – maybe once, three times – done. Big deal. Not exciting. Faith easy. Most challenging, most dynamic, most adventurous encounter. Jesus is the same yesterday, today & forever but our apprehension, understanding, experience never finished. Alive. Growing. Dynamic.

When do we see this? Verse 17 = Stop grabbing, latching onto me. Suggests she was clinging to Jesus. What's so bad about that? Believing into? Why did Jesus say... (once again, not the way we would write a resurrection story: camera move in for a close up, dramatic soft music, teary embrace, Jesus would say, "Let's gather up the boys. Were headed back to Galilee – take the world by storm. "Touch me not" – "stop grabbing onto me, slobbering on me" – so cold, non-dramatic, so unlike Jesus).

Point? Clue – how Mary addressed Jesus – Rabboni = Teacher. Mary remembers good old days traveling around Galilee, listening to Jesus teach and heal. Jesus was Rabboni, Rabbi, the wonderful teacher. Mary liked that. It felt comfortable and safe. She wanted to hold onto that. She wanted the good old days – she wanted Jesus the way she wanted him. Jesus kept saying – things are going to change. It won't be the same. I am going to die on a cross. I will rise again but then I won't be physically present forever. But I have something better: I will send my Spirit to live within you. It's different, it will be a change, but trust me, it's better. So prepare for your faith to grow and stretch.

There's a beautiful scene in C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series – in the second book Prince Caspian. As you may know, Jesus is represented by the character named Aslan, a mighty, huge, powerful, loving and fierce lion. A young girl named Lucy believes in Aslan but she longs for more of his presence. She's walking through a forest when she hears a voice call to her. She's not sure where the voice is coming from but she wants to find out. Pick up the story ...

"But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." Faith in the risen Christ is alive and dynamic. As we grow up in Christ, Jesus doesn't change but we do. Our faith grows – but I have to warn you: like Mary experienced, sometimes this is a painful process. Change is hard. We want to count on Jesus doing certain things in a certain way on a certain timetable. But he doesn't always cooperate.

### **Conclusion:**

We've been looking at real faith – the genuine thing. We said it was impossible – unless God intervenes. Are you trying to hold on to faith or are you letting Christ hold on to you? We said real faith is personal – do you have a personal faith? Or is it all just in your head? Is it on your lips and in your heart? How do you get that? You ask for it. In a moment we'll do just that. Is your faith alive and growing bigger? Or has it become dull and static and stale?

Let's pray – and as I pray I will pause after each line and give you a chance to pray it for yourself:

*Lord Jesus Christ, Risen and Alive,  
I believe but help my unbelief,  
Faith is not my gift to you but your gift to me,  
I bring my small faith to you,  
Thank you that you will accept me.  
I want my faith in you to be personal,  
So I personally call on you to save me, forgive me and lead my whole life.  
Forgive me for letting my faith get stale,  
Make it alive and growing.  
Jesus you are Lord.  
Amen.*