

April 1, 2018  
**Grace Wins. Grace Always Wins.**  
Annette Hill Briggs  
John 20:1-18

*[The Resurrection of Jesus]*

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*[Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene]*

*<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Grace wins. Grace always wins. Even when it takes forever to see grace win, grace still wins. In the meantime, we live by faith, knowing that by his rising, grace has won. God chose to love and keep us, when God had every right and reason to give us up for good, to abandon us to ourselves and one another: we humans; we children; children who destroy what the Parent-God-Creator offered freely – and in the process destroy each

other, destroy ourselves. But rather than punish or abandon, which surely would have been easier, God absorbed the offense; surrendered the anger; stayed and loved, full of grace and mercy, for our weakness and our fear and for the cruelty we commit as a result. By God's choice, God's will, grace wins.

Grace always wins. By grace, the world is set to rights. By grace, justice rules. By grace, death dies. Life wins. God reigns.

Have you seen the movie *Wonder Woman*? Where she's in the trenches in France with three seasoned soldiers: an American, an Irishman and an Indian? The shelling is constant. The soldiers explain *stalemate* to her. *It's gone on two years*, they say. She's horrified. *Someone has to do something*, she says. *We can't*, they say. But she's Wonderwoman, there to do what humanity cannot, and will not, do for itself. She climbs up and over the edge of stalemate, charging into the destruction, defeating the enemies, rescuing a village. The Christology starts breaking down fast, but for that one moment it shines.

Humanity at war with itself for so long, we cannot conceive of how not to be. Jesus enters the trenches where everyone else is paralyzed with fear and also hopelessness. Jesus does for us what we humans cannot do for ourselves, and the backbone of death is broken, once and for all.

Mary Magdalene doesn't know it yet. She's headed for the tomb, the graveyard. To do what, John doesn't say. To grieve? To tend Jesus' body? What we know for sure is that Mary Magdalene assumes he's dead. She went to the cemetery, after all, not his house, his friends' houses, the Temple. She went where dead people are and fully expected to find him there.

For some the graveyard is a place to visit our dead, knowing full well the dead are no more there than they are anywhere. Yet, for some of us, the graveyard is a particular spot on the earth for marking their absence in all the rest of our lives, somewhere to go when we cannot be WHERE we most want to be – that is, with them. We know they aren't there – and yet knowing their bodies were once there somehow makes the trip seem worthy. Still, none of us go expecting our loved ones to be waiting there for us, ready for conversation. Mary finds the grave is opened, the body stolen or moved. She fetches Peter and John. They see burial clothes, folded of course, because it's Jesus. We're meant to remember Lazarus waking up and walking out still all wrapped up.

Jesus' rising was intentional. *He did his laundry*, as I like to say. Mary saw none of that. Only that his body's gone. His DEAD body. I personally can write a backstory to any situation in about 20 seconds. And the backstory I write is always the worst possible scenario. Being Mary, I'd have assumed the chief priests paid someone to steal and hide the body to cover up the whole thing so his followers couldn't make a martyr of him.

Peter and John go home; Mary stays; angels arrive. They ask why she's crying. She explains her grave robber theory. And keeps crying. Now a man comes along. A gardener, she thinks.

*Whom are you looking for?* He wants to know. A sensible question in a graveyard; markers can be hard to find. Except he's not the gardener. Nothing ever means just one thing in the gospel of John, and we've heard this voice ask this question before, in chapter 1. Two disciples of John the Baptist peeled off to follow Jesus. He felt them behind him, turned and said, *"What are you looking for?"*

The whole gospel starts over in chapter 20. Now we can read everything in the right light. The light of his resurrection, where nothing now means what it meant before.

He's not the groundskeeper. He's the Creator of the universe, and he knows her name. From the graveyard, from the void, from the place beyond all hope, he calls her own name. *"Mary,"* Jesus says to her. *"Rabbouni!"* she replied, which means *"My teacher!"*

I don't know the words to do this story justice, I can no more preach this story than I can hit a mid-court shot blindfolded. Yet you still know what I'm aiming for. But in my mind's hearing of the text, there is such a loooooong silence between verses 16 and 17. The long silence of him letting her hug him and of him holding her. Until he has to peel her off him. *"Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"* And she does.

But I can't imagine it was easy, being her first act of faith and all. Because I *get* wanting to hold on. I REALLY *get* seeing Jesus after thinking she'd never see him again, and the temptation to imagine all the horror and fear and grief of the last five days was just a nightmare, and now that Jesus was back everything could go back to the way it was before. Everything could just be great again, like it was in Galilee. All that sunshine and seashore. Picnics and open air revivals with hundreds of people following them.

But all of life wasn't Galilee, was it? Jesus wouldn't let them stay in Galilee forever. He decided to go back to Jerusalem, where people were determined to kill him. And nothing any of them could do would stop him once he'd turned his face in that direction. All the world is not Galilee in springtime. Bullets and bombs and people living in trenches are just as real. The stalemate of war and disease and poverty that grinds people into hopelessness this side of the graveyard, where people are helpless against our own fear and weakness; where human beings destroy each other and ourselves, barely even trying. It'd be awesome to pretend all the world was Galilee. But Jesus tells her *no*, that she has to let him go again.

Mary knows he's risen, and now she'll know he didn't rise just for her. *Go and tell my brothers too*, he says. *I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.*

And so she let go of Jesus, again. And in some ways forever. The Jesus she had known so far; the one who walked and talked and was her teacher; the one who ate with them and preached to them; who healed the sick and fed the hungry and talked theology with women; who said God loved the poor and the prisoner and the foreigner; who said the Romans were to be treated as kindly as a neighbor – he was awesome and wonderful, and Mary left her life for him. But he was still just the Jesus she had known so far.

*Don't hold on to who I was*, Jesus tells her here. *Who I was is not who I came to be. Or what I came to do for you. For everyone.*

Friends, all this Lenten season we've been holding back for this very moment. He is alive. Not "still" – but rather "again." He was dead. Now he's alive. But even death is under the command and direction of the Creator of the universe. The universe of death is contained within the universe of the Creator. Death takes its bidding from the Creator. Death is something smaller than, contained within, Life itself.

I can't explain it. I can only say it. And words are too small and too few to say it perfectly. What Mary learned first is this: death does not have the last word in this world, in the order of things, when what we were sure was a hopeless, lifeless, dead-in-the-grave, over-and-done-with, broken-for-good situation, God was all along, alive and watching over us, with our own names on the tip of God's tongue, calling us to himself again and again and again, Easter after Easter after Easter, for as long as we need to muster the faith that it takes to know Him risen, alive, and with us right here, right now, and forever.

Would you pray with me?