

Jesus Transforms Us: Jesus Comforts
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TONY

It was amazing how many new comedians emerged during the decade of the Great Depression! People who were able to give the gift of laughter in dark times were precious and celebrated. Laughter in the face of discouraging circumstances reminds us of the deeper goodness that lies underneath. That's why I have found myself appreciating and even posting to Facebook both serious and silly things...to help me and you tap into that underlying joy. **Here's some of the silliness I saw this week...some from you all!... that made me chuckle.... :)**

We've been doing more of the serious stuff here in our times with you...reminding you what really matters, no matter what's going on in the world. On Easter Sunday we rejoiced with our friend Jesus, like the early disciples did, that he had risen from the grave! Last week we told you how his resurrection has changed *everything* for us... even though we aren't always aware of just how radically transformed we really are. That's when joy comes in... when we find out that as he was changed, so are we! His early friends illustrate this transformation, as we'll see. And it really matters...always!...but especially right now. What he has already done for us and in us is exactly what we need for such times....and exactly what we have to offer the rest of the world.

JO ANN

And, if what we have to offer is transformation through Christ's resurrection, let's first notice something about the nature of that transformation...

It is **An Ongoing Process** ... Jesus' resurrection happened quickly. He was placed in His tomb on Friday evening and walked out of it on Sunday morning. His transformation happened over the course of three days... but our transformation happens over the course of a lifetime.

When we first give our lives to Christ in faith, we are united with Him and become one Spirit with Him. (1 **Corinthians 6:17**) We become new creations, as we saw last week. But it takes time for that spiritual transformation to outwork into all the other aspects of our being. Paul describes the process this way: **And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 NIV)**

The idea here is that over time, as His ongoing transformation process outworks on the inside... it can be seen on the outside... in shades of ever-increasing glory. Think of it like a dimmer switch-- as the process of transformation continues... the very presence (glory/image) of Christ can be seen shining through our lives... in ever-increasing intensity.... until, at some time in the future, even our physical bodies will be clothed with immortality, just like His. :) But, this process is not automatic... something of us is also needed...

TONY

...because Jesus' transformation process is also...**an Indwelling Partnership**. He is in us, and we are in him, living life together. When I was younger, I imagined my faith as something I had to do on my own. What good news!.. gospel even!... to discover what was true all along... that

the Spirit of Christ is in me, doing life through me... in partnership with my own will and desires. Together, as active partners we cooperate together to change me from the inside out, so that I am increasingly transformed into the character of Christ.

JO ANN

... and through that changed identity and shared union with Christ... the transformation process becomes a journey of **Unfolding Purpose**... So many Christians believe that once they have a personal relationship with God through Christ... discover their individual gifts and callings... and do those things... they have arrived at the fullness of God's purpose in creating them.

Ummm... no. All of that personal reality is true... no argument there. But there is more... because each person's individual God-given purpose is simply **one strand of the fabric** of the eternal purposes God is outworking in the whole world... the whole creation... through all time and history. And what is the purpose God is unfolding? **This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth. (Ephesians 1:10 CEB)**

And the good news is that every one of us matters in God's unfolding purpose... both individually and together!

TONY

All good stuff, right? But what does this look like, practically, in a real world of unemployment, fear, isolation, and division? Over the next few weeks we'll flesh this out in a variety of ways. Today we notice that **Jesus comforts**. Now, some of us will nod our heads in agreement with this... because this is the Jesus we have met. But some others might struggle a bit, because somewhere along the way we've been given a different image. If so, good news! Jesus had been comforting people throughout his life...and it's really no surprise that after his resurrection, he does the same thing. That's who he was... and still is! But now, because of the Resurrection, his friend are able to receive and respond to his comfort differently than ever before.

He began with them as He does with all of us... **by meeting them exactly where they were**. So where were they, emotionally and spiritually, in the days and weeks after the resurrection? Well, in many ways where we are right now!...in confusion and ambiguity, experiencing what felt like opposite things at the same time. It was simultaneously an experience of great trauma and great grace. They felt both grief and joy...they had lost and they had found and they hadn't reconciled those emotions yet. They knew both fear and peace...which sounds contradictory unless you've been there. And they expressed both doubt and hope. Any of that sound familiar?

JO ANN

Each week we will be exploring biblical accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances... watching as Jesus joins His disciples where they are... and invites them into the transformation process so they can **(to) join Him where He is**. And because everything happened so quickly He gave them time to adjust... to experience healing of past pain in order to welcome future hope...

This week, as we notice the first part of Jesus' process of transformation, we will look at the beautiful story of Him comforting His dear friend, Mary Magdalene, as she wept outside His empty tomb... beside herself with grief...

Mary arrived back at the tomb, broken and sobbing. She stooped to peer inside, and through her tears she saw two angels in dazzling white robes, sitting where Jesus' body had been laid—one at the head and one at the feet! "Dear woman, why are you crying?" they asked. Mary answered, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him." Then she turned around to leave, and there was Jesus standing in front of her, but she didn't realize that it was him! He said to her, "Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Mary answered, thinking he was only the gardener, "Sir, if you have taken his body somewhere else, tell me, and I will go and . . ."

"Mary," Jesus interrupted her. Turning to face him, she said, "Rabboni!" (Aramaic for "my teacher"). Jesus cautioned her, "Mary, don't hold on to me now, for I haven't yet ascended to God, my Father. And he's not only my Father and God, but now he's your Father and your God! Now go to my brothers and tell them what I've told you, that I am ascending to my Father—and your Father, to my God—and your God!" Then Mary Magdalene left to inform the disciples of her encounter with Jesus. "I have seen the Lord!" she told them. And she gave them his message (John 20:11-18 TPT).

TONY

What was it like to be Mary that weekend? She was **adrift**... she was disoriented, confused... traumatized...the anchor of her life had been pulled up and she's without anything solid to hold onto. Have you ever felt that way? Discombobulated? Not just externally... because the world has abruptly changed around you... but also internally? Perhaps a feeling that you have lost all meaning in life? That you don't even know who you are anymore, or what is real? That's Mary! She had given up everything to follow Jesus into the Kingdom she thought He would establish on earth...and now she not only lost that dream, she had lost her Beloved Friend...

...And her Friend knew that! He had just felt that pain and loss himself. What was it like to be *Jesus* that weekend? He had felt abandoned by his friends precisely when he needed them most. He had felt forsaken by his Father, the one he was most intimate with. And he felt those things while experiencing the unspeakable trauma of the cross, with all its physical torture. He really did understand how Mary felt... and he really does understand how we feel...

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. He did not lose himself or his trust in the Father in the midst of his pain and bewilderment. ***So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most (Hebr. 4:15-16 NLT).*** We have in Jesus a High Priest who has experienced everything we have... and understands... and is thus able to comfort us in ways no one else ever can.

JO ANN

And we see him doing that with Mary. **How did Jesus comfort her?** First, **He's present**... He came to her where she was, as she was... and created a safe atmosphere. She had just seen shining angels and was overwhelmed... So Jesus doesn't shock her more by revealing Himself in all of His spectacular "ta-da!"ness... He gradually reveals Himself... first as a **Gardener**... someone who will patiently tend her broken heart... Jesus is empathetic, gentle... continuing where the angels left off, "Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" And

then He compassionately listens as her grief, confusion, and pain gushes out... His focus remains on her until she is calm enough to hear Him...

Are you getting a sense of how comforting Jesus' safe, listening presence was for Mary? Especially since others might have judged her as crazy... But Jesus doesn't condemn by asking "What's wrong with you, Mary?" Rather, Jesus comforts... in essence asking, "What happened to you, Mary?" He is safe and soothing... and very, very present...

TONY

And his presence is very very **personal**. He says, "Mary." He speaks her name, no doubt in a way that she had heard countless times before, and that's when she recognizes him! [**"My sheep hear my voice..."**] He doesn't lecture her, he doesn't teach her the metaphysics of resurrection, he doesn't appeal to her head at all at this point. That's not what she needs. Instead, He gives his adrift, drowning friend a lifeline, a solid place to stand in the shifting sea of emotion. And what said in that simple name, and the few words exchanged, was that although everything has changed, some things are unchanging!...that he and she are still connected in love... that "YOU still matter to Me"... even though the way they relate is going to change.

JO ANN

As Jesus comforts, He's Present... Personal... and **He's promising**. Mary responds to recognizing Jesus the way any of us would... she embraces Him. And again, He doesn't condemn her, but comforts her by gently anchoring her in their new reality... "Mary, **don't hold onto me in this way anymore**... our relationship has changed and we will never be separated again! Though your head can't grasp this yet... let not your heart be troubled... our relationship will become far deeper than you can imagine... because it's no longer just you and me... My Father is now **YOUR Father**... and you are His daughter!"

Jesus comforts by giving her hope... the promise that no matter how it may seem now, **things are changing for the better**. And the same is true for US in this anxious time we are living in... Jesus comforts us with that same hope and promise... So, **let's not cling to what was**... let's hold on instead to the hope-filled promise that one day, not too long from now, we are going to understand more clearly the purpose God is unfolding in our lives right now. :)

And then Jesus comforts Mary some more... He gives her something to do now that will allow her to share in the hope... He tells her to do something no woman would ever have been asked to do before... *Go bring this message of My resurrection and ascension to My brothers* (the first time Jesus calls the men brothers)... "Mary went and told them... "**I have seen the Lord!**" And, as an eyewitness to the Risen Christ, sent by Him with a message... Mary Magdalene became the first apostle... living proof that Jesus' process of transformation was already unfolding... and was not only for HIM... it was for ALL of us...

TONY

So Jesus comforts Mary in a way that is present to her, personal to her, and promising to her. What did she do in response? She didn't recite a creed. She didn't even stop and ponder these things in her heart. There's a time for all that! But in that moment all this was all too unexpected, and too wonderful!... and so she responded instinctively with exuberant joy. And then she **participated**, as best she could in the intensity of that moment, in what God was up to.

Her response can be ours too! Do you want to ponder the theological implications of a global pandemic? Sure. Do you want to predict how the world will be different after this? Go for it! But in that pondering and predicting do not lose sight of the most important thing....Jesus is alive! And our exuberant joy about that, our participation with him, is a transformed way of relating to God, and others, and ourselves. Everything has changed for us too! And now, with Christ in us, **we too can be, like Jesus, present with each other, personal with each other, and promising to each other.** This isn't theory. Our world is adrift like Mary, and we need to keep our faith very real and very practical for life right now. So here are some suggestions...

First, **honor everyone**....our theme for this year, especially true right now. Honor everyone, especially when they are disoriented, distraught, or disagreeable. Honor everyone, even when they disagree with your perspectives on things. Honor everyone, even when they're wrong. Let's show this troubled world authentic respect. Let's be like Jesus was with Mary...

JO ANN

Yes, and as we honor everyone, let's **Comfort everyone**... Let's not harshly condemn those who look "crazy" to us... let's not harshly demand, "What's wrong with you?!" rather let's be a safe place for others to share their confusion, fear, and pain... and let's listen for as long as they need to be able to listen again, not to us, but to Jesus calling their names!

Let's offer Christ's compassion... and hope... and promise... not only with words which can be spectacularly meaningless at times like this... But let's offer what we have actually received... God's comfort... ***2 Corinthians 1:4 -- He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction.***

TONY

And then also "**include everyone**". Jesus made it clear that all are invited to this participation in the new creation. Even Peter, who had denied him. And the women too! If the male disciples are His brothers, then the female disciples are His sisters... they are all family of the same Father. And we'll see in the coming weeks that the group of Jesus' disciples, friends, brothers, sisters will expand to include far more than they had ever imagined. So let's do the same! Let's invite the whole broken world into this marvelous kingdom that God has created through Jesus.

JO ANN

And you may be thinking, how is that possible? How can I be that kind of honoring, comforting, including person when I'm struggling to maintain my own balance? There is good news for all of us who feel **adrift** like Mary was at the beginning of this story... we can be **anchored**. And what is that anchor? Hope that the economy will rebound soon? Confidence in doctors or political leaders? Bravado that the virus won't affect me? No.... we have a better, stronger, more permanent anchor than any of that... we have Jesus, who is inviting us to transformation precisely in this moment when we don't have a clue what's going on.

TONY

So we, too, can participate... in the most fundamental life-transforming way possible—we can choose to **trust Jesus** in ever-increasing ways. This is the core and ongoing invitation of our spiritual lives...it's what the word "faith" really means. But it's not all up to us...even this is done

in partnership with his Spirit. When we begin to trust in a love that is so deeply personal and so powerfully healing, we find it possible to stop clinging, and surrender to it. And then we can even trust what we can't yet understand. We can trust that over time it will make sense, or even if not, we can trust the ongoing process, that indwelling partnership, and that unfolding purpose that we noted at the beginning of this message...which means that we can trust the invitation to take the next step, even without knowing where it will lead. Trusting just the next step forward when we can't see or control the whole journey, is transformational faith, indeed.

JO ANN

An Invitation to Prayer...

To close our time together, we invite you to allow the living Word... both the Scriptures and Jesus Himself... to become as real for you as He was for Mary Magdalene. I am going to lead you through a simple biblical prayer reflection based on John 20:11-18... You can stay with this now, or you can pause the recording and come back to pray later, whatever seems right to you.

Let's close our eyes and get still inside as we ask the Holy Spirit to make this scripture come alive... "Lord, please allow Your Word to be alive and active now... and please reveal Yourself through it in ways that are most personal and comforting for each one."

With your godly imagination, begin to see the scene at Jesus' empty tomb. Is the sun shining? Can you feel the breeze on your face? What are you hearing? Now focus on Mary, distraught with grief... what do you feel as you watch her?

See Mary bend down to look into the tomb. The dark opening suddenly shines with bright light. From inside the tomb you hear "Why are you crying?" Mary weeps into the dooway... "They've taken my Lord away... I don't know where He is!" You see that she is afraid and confused... In what ways are you afraid or confused right now? Adrift in a sea of uncertainty? What weeps inside you? Take a moment to be aware of how your experience resonates with Mary's...

When you are ready, pray something like this: Lord, I don't know what to do. I am confused, afraid, disappointed, frustrated. Sometimes I don't see you, but I want to know where you are in the midst of the challenges I face every day. I don't need spectacular angels... I just need You. Please reveal yourself to me...

Mary turns to run away... but someone is standing in front of her. He asks tenderly, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" She doesn't seem to recognize who it is... she just keeps her head down and continues to pour out her pain, asking this man to tell her where Jesus' body is so she can go get it... As you watch this scene, what do you notice in yourself? Have you ever been... are you now... that desperate to be in control of the circumstances of your life? Or so disoriented that you need something tangible to anchor you in reality? Take a moment to be aware of how your experience resonates with Mary's...

When you are ready, pray something like this: Lord, I feel out of control. I don't understand what's happening and it's hard not to know the outcome. I sometimes find it difficult to believe you're really with me. Please comfort me that you are still with me, even when I can't sense it. Thank you for being the patient Gardener of my soul... who listens to me with such compassion...

You watch Jesus listening with such love in his eyes. Then He smiles and says, "Mary!" She stops talking... looks straight up into the man's face... and you see recognition dawn. "My Teacher!" she cries... and grabs hold of Jesus. He laughs and gently steps back... "You don't need to hold onto Me like this anymore, Mary... let go..." ... As you watch this scene unfold, what is happening inside of you? Jesus now looks at you... and you hear Him say your name... Let the Holy Spirit unfold the rest for you...

When you are ready, pray something like this: Lord, your name is precious to me... and I long to experience just how precious my name is to you! Please speak my name again and again... in love, in comfort, in hope, in peace... and help me to experience your presence always, and especially in times like this.

Now, listen as Jesus honors Mary by sending her to His brothers with the message of His coming ascension. Watch her excitement as she runs, "I have seen the Lord!" Jesus now looks at you... smiles... and speaks... Take whatever time you need to listen, and to respond.... What is the next step Jesus is asking 9 to take?

TONY

Seven centuries before Jesus, God spoke to the prophet Isaiah. In the language of the old King James Version he said, "**Comfort ye my people**. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." His people were in distress, as we are. And we have far more comfort to receive than even they did! So we encourage you to finish this worship service by listening to the musical version of that verse, made famous by Handel's Messiah. We've posted a contemporary rendition, or find the original if you prefer. Either way, today God speaks to you and me the same message.... "Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to my people. Tell them to trust me." And so that is the prayer we pray for you, and the blessing we pass along to you today... Be comforted! And be comforting!