



## God Loves Me – Touchpoint for July 19, 2023

### John 20:11-18 (NIV) Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

**Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.**

"God loves me. Say it again. God loves me. Say it again. God loves me. I can do anything. I can do anything good because God loves me, and I'm amazed by it!" –Maya Angelou

When I read this encounter between Jesus and Mary, I couldn't help but ask, why Jesus? Why hold Mary at a distance? In that moment of seeing Jesus, her grief was gone and the most human thing to do was to run into his arms. Then I wondered, what if she hadn't let go?! As my ADHD mind often does, I imagined the scene from the Christopher Reeves' original Superman. The love theme, *Can You Read My Mind* playing as Mary hangs on to Jesus in his graceful ascension. Fortunately, I drifted down to earth with Mary and I began looking up what others have said about Jesus' big dis of his dear friend. Here are three interpretations offered.

- He had a job to do in sending the Holy Spirit and didn't have time for emotions to get in the way. Mary lost him once, she wasn't going to let it happen again.
- One author said other women had been clinging to his resurrected self and it was too much. So, I guess he'd become too big for his cloak and britches.
- Jesus wanted Mary to live by faith now. So basically, get over it Mary. I'm kind of a big deal now.

Not one theologian wrote about the profound intimacy involved in Mary's ascending love moment with Jesus. How could we say Jesus' life was a love story and miss this love story?

If commentators and gospel writers can take liberties with suspect details, then I shall do the same. The story I will tell my grandchildren is Mary loved Jesus and Jesus loved Mary. In a biblical way? I don't know. Maybe I'll leave that part out. Should have left it out of here. Anyway he deeply loved her.

Jesus knew that love is about letting go and not holding on to *The Way We Were*. (See what I did there?) It is ever expanding. To paraphrase what Paul said, we now must see all humankind as being in Christ, not lacking Jesus. Even he died to his prior self for all, that we dispense with assumptions that we all live with a God-sized void in our life.

To hold on to our belief about someone or something is to create a clinging attachment that must be maintained and defended. Transformation always involves letting go. A giving way to what is expanding and emerging. It was Jesus' way of saying, "Mary I love you and that love is available in all the universe and it's what makes you and I one with God in love. Therefore, I will never leave you, nor you I. We are in Christ."

Nearly two years ago I was preparing a message for the Community of the Wild Goose. I found myself week after week struggling to bring hope to a community that had one thing in common. Recovery. Not religious dogma, or orthodox practices. It was our attempt to live more authentic lives. It became more difficult to formulate a message. We all came on Sundays with a cloud of weariness and downright hopelessness in our nation and in our world. You all know what I am talking about. It was a global experience. We are still experiencing the trauma of it all. I couldn't feign hope anymore, and I posed a question I had been swimming in. IS LOVE ENOUGH?

Is the power of love we've espoused; all it's cracked up to be.

Is love enough or is it merely palliative care for a world descending into chaos? Is love enough to move the immovable? Transform the resistant? Inspire so much humility that one prideful person might say, 'Hey everyone, I was wrong!?' Could it bring sanity to crazed minds set on vengeance? Can it build bridges and remove walls, not just philosophical ones but real ones? Does it encompass all of life or is it merely inserted when needed? Is love merely a protective parent holding children close as the storms and propaganda wars pass? They seem to never pass.

Perhaps this is why we are drawn to YouTube videos showing heart tugging acts of compassion. They are so rare they must be recorded. Is love merely a quote to be posted on social media to impress others with our good intentions and provide a few minutes of fading inspiration?

I had to admit the sobering reality that brutal and verbal force seemed to be winning and worse, it had been germinated in the walls of evangelical Christianity.

I began to look at love from the words of Franciscan Sister and professor Ilia Delio's book *The Primacy of Love*, Jürgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life* and others who have learned to see and express the boundless love that is present in nature's forces of attraction.

Maya Angelou says it with great passion and tearful eyes of gratitude. "I don't know if it is that which keeps the stars in the firmament or what keeps our blood flowing through our body. But I know that God loves me, and I am amazed by it."

Two years later I am convinced that over time the slow forceful movement of love is like tectonic plates below the Earth's surface. These plates are moving so slowly they go unnoticed above the Earth's surface.

What we do matters to matter. As more people give themselves to humility it will move all human structures. Shifting land and swallowing hate. Hate is quick acting and can do enormous damage both to the planet, to people and to our understanding of God. But like manmade concrete laid above a tectonic plate it cannot remain as it is. It will eventually break through the superficial constructs we've created above ground.

My next question was how much love and how many people would it take to move a world imbedded in its ideology and self-protection?

I began to see that love does not impact molecules from the outside alone but inhabits those molecules in all the universe.

All of life is subject to a divine invisible force that operates in nature even at the molecular level. There is a pulling attraction in the stars. There is attraction in our falling in love and man, can that rock our world.

It is a relentless attractive force in all matter. If we are aware, then we will see it and participate in it. It will change our minds if we allow it. It will suggest other ways, creative ways to love if we're vulnerable to such audacious change. It will see letting go as a gift to our loved ones allowing for their own transformation on God's terms, on love's terms, not mine.

This love is not something we possess; it encompasses us and invites us to surrender to it. Any resistance to this inner and outer force will create conflict in and about us.

Like Mary, we slip into thinking we possess God and others. We think we know what love's emotional response ought to be. Then someone says, 'Don't hold on to me. Don't cling to me. Don't hold on to what you've determined me to be even if you think it's good.'

Starting the journey of knowing love's expansive power is first and foremost about letting go. We become co-laborers. We move away from willpower and into my willingness combined with God's power, thereby participating in God's divine nature and allowing the slow and powerful movements of love.

A choice to hold on to fear, resentment, bitterness, suspicion, revenge, and irrational skepticism reflects a surrender to a false god. The god of individualism which attaches to the need to be right, to be in control and the need to be enough.

The only salve in these dark moments is allowing the light of love in and around to guide you. Its attraction is more compelling than fear of punishment. No matter how small the flame flickers, we must allow it to spread in and out of us. As the old camp song says, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." We can relinquish the need to set a fire in others. We just nurture the spark in us and be the kindling in the world that is waiting for love to emerge.

We can begin the work of letting go by becoming aware of a negative thought or judgment or belief about ourselves or others that has rented space in our mind for way too long. We can then let go of what we thought we needed to change around us in order for us to be happy and free.

By releasing our grip, we create space for love's spark. Beginning with love of self, compassion becomes our companion along the way. This self-love has been waiting for our welcome. Jesus was the very revelation of God's compassion so as he says, 'Don't hold on, let go.' Next, we practice gratitude as love ascends and attachments fade. When we taste the first fruit of an open heart it must be nurtured, creating

new pathways in our brain. We might need to let go of a long-held theology that has governed our false assumptions. For example, there will be those who cannot refer to love *as* God and God *as* love. They cling to a primitive God who is distant and authoritative. Demanding love as allegiance, work ethic, and good deeds. God becomes the ascended idea of what we should be: a super being. The Bible becomes a very long DC Comic and God is the superhero.

Entertain this universal love that permeates the universe and meditate on it. Let it seep to the heart and you'll begin to see God in all things. No matter what we think and have thought or done or had done to us, this God *is* love and that love loves me. It pursues me even in my need to control this God of love. It doesn't mean I like everyone. It means that love is never an option because it seeps within me and in all others and in nature. It is the very essence of life and breath.

In 2010 I was asked by a spiritual directee if I would drive with him across country to pick up a car. We were sitting in a McDonald's that had a television playing. Jennifer Knapp, a once-popular young Christian musician was being interviewed by Larry King. She mysteriously had stopped recording in 2000 and lived privately in Australia. She came back to the U.S. in 2010 and publicly came out as a gay Christian. She had protected herself from her fundamentalist circle for 10 years. On the panel with her was a young popular evangelical pastor. He was there to tell her what she was doing was wrong. He said "God loves you, Jennifer, and I love you, and what you're doing is wrong." She very directly said, *"I don't know who you are and you're not my pastor. I have no reason to believe that you actually love me. I have a pastor and I know he loves me, and he accepts me for who I am. He is my mentor."*

The guy I was with turned to me and asked me what do you think of Jennifer Knapp? I remember thinking, who cares what I think of her, the question is what God thinks of her. And in this letting go of division according to behavior, and the way that one loves is to say all that matters is that God loves her without caveat. Let Jennifer, who was confined by the Christian music industry, go! I would rather her be thought of in the world as God's bad girl than Man's good girl.

To let go is to gradually embrace love without caveat, without condition. It doesn't mean tolerating. It doesn't mean hanging out with someone with the agenda of changing them. It's letting this love which holds the stars in the firmament and keeps the blood flowing in our body and our minds full of clarity and free.

God is love. Love without God is an attachment. God without love is legalism.

**Amen.**

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### **Be Still**

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

### **Spirit of the Living God**

(Celtic Spirits)

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **Come, Bring Your Burdens to God (Woza Nomthwalo Wakho)**

(John L. Bell, The Wild Goose Collection)

*Swahili:*

Woza nomthwalo wakho,

Woza nomthwalo wakho,

Woza nomthwalo wakho,

Uyes' akasozathi hayi.

Come, bring your burdens to God,

Come, bring your burdens to God,

Come, bring your burdens to God,

For Jesus will never say no.

## **The Meal**

### **Our Father (The Lord's Prayer)**

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

## **Benediction**

### **Christ Before Me**

(Keith Duke)

Christ before me. Christ behind me.

Christ above me. Christ below me.

Christ to left and Christ to right.

Christ within both day and night.